

## **BEYOND THE HIMALAYAN BORDERLANDS: INDIAN TEXTILE PRODUCTION AND TRADE WITH CENTRAL ASIA DURING MUGHALS**

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### **Introduction**

The Himalayan border lands, as part of the silk route networking system, connected the Indian subcontinent to the outside world, particularly Central Asia<sup>1</sup> and China, and beyond, via various routes and passes across high mountains<sup>2</sup> which provided a way for different traders, travelers, and men of culture to transmit culture, ideas, and value systems from one region to the other. In terms of trade, Indian merchants traveled to various parts of Central Asia regularly to do business, and traders from Turan and Iran traveled to various towns in India to sell their wares. Different kinds of commodities were exchanged, however, cotton textiles and war horses occupied a premier position in the exchange of goods. In this context, the study is focused on the export of Indian textiles to Iran and Turan. For the analysis purpose, the Historical Method has been used, and given the lack of statistical data in our sources, attempts have been made to arrive at a rough figure of textile production and exports to Central Asia.

### **Textile trade with Central Asia**

Although Persian sources provide scant information about the commodities traded between Indian and Central Asian traders, yet travel reports deliver useful information and it seems that cotton textiles, indigo, and war horses, as well as spices, sugar, and some precious stones, were important marketable commodities. In addition, Iran and Turan particularly Balkh, Bukhara, and Samarqand provided India with a huge supply of dried and fresh fruits (Bernier, 1891, 249). We are told that fresh fruits began to be imported from Turan when caravan routes became more secure and were utilized more often during the seventeenth century.

As a result, it is reported that Mughal emperor Jahangir got melons from Kariz and grapes and apples from Samarqand (Jahangir, 1909, 270, 350). Mughals sold cotton textiles as an important export item and imported Central Asian war horses, which were in high demand in the Mughal empire's military organization, motivating the rulers to safeguard the routes and merchants. Thus, the volume of exchange was influenced both by demand and

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supply and the commercial policies as well as the political stability of these regions (Dale, 1994, 14).

Indian textiles found in Iran and Turan originated from all over the subcontinent. Turbans, napkins, handkerchiefs, robes, towels, Banarasi wraps, silk brocade, and Kashmiri shawls were among the important finished products found in Iran and Turan, as were bulk quantities of linen, muslin, calico, and chintz<sup>3</sup> of varied grades and printed designs (Jenkinson, 1886, 87-88; Burton, 1993, 29). All Indian textiles were used by the common people as well as the elite, except the costly Banarasi wraps, silk brocades, and Kashmiri shawls, which were only used by the Central Asian elite.<sup>4</sup>

Although Indian textiles transported to different international markets originated across the subcontinent, a significant portion of the Indian textiles in Iran and Turan came from Punjab, which remained a key manufacturing centre during the Mughal period. John Richards writing about Punjab says that "thousands of weavers produced specialized cotton cloth for various markets in Central Asia, the Middle East and beyond" (Richards, 1993,50). Thus, many Punjabi cities including Lahore, Bajwara, Batala, Machiwara, Samana, and Sialkot began to specialize in textile manufacture throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Sirhind, for example, manufactured chintz and muslin. Several kinds of textiles were made by the artisans of Bajwara and Sultanpur. Sialkot was another major textile production centre and according to SujanRaiBhandari, "embroidery with silk and gold threads and many kinds of bafta, chira (scarf), fotah (sheet), sozani, adsaka, table cloth, tray covers, small tents with gold thread are well manufactured there" (Bhandari, 1901, 83, 95, 98-100). Batala was another textile manufacturing centre and based on the size of the town, Chetan Singh suggested that it must have been a production centre of textiles (Singh, 1991, 184). Besides Punjabi fabric, Central and West Asian traders were also drawn to other towns and cities such as Panipat and Agra for the purchase of textiles (Foster, 1912, 134; Purchas, 1905, 83). We are told that foreign merchants used to come to Delhi regularly to buy chintz (Foster, 1912, 134).

Apart from Punjab and Delhi, merchants from several places came to Patna for its wide variety of textiles. Thus, in 1620, Robert Hughes reported that several merchants came to Patna solely to buy textiles. He noted that "the Mogoles and Praychaes are here like bees, whose cheepest provisions are Mandyles (turban cloth), girdells, layches and doupattas of Malda .... these are brought for trade to Lahore and thence for Persia" (Foster, 1906, 195). Similarly, Peter Mundy saw that Persian, Armenian and other merchants were frequently visiting Patna. Describing Saif Khan Sarai, he wrote, "this place is cheifely for the merchants of straunge countries, as Mogolls, Persians, Armenians, where they may

lodge and keepe their goods the tyme of their stay heere, payeing so much by the moneth" (Mundy, 1914, 159). Banaras, like Patna, was known for its vast supplies of cotton products (Pelsaert, 1925, 7; Naqvi, 1972, 121-123). Manrique was astonished by the quantity and quality of Banaras textiles and he ascribed the city's riches to its enormous production of exceptionally fine cotton cloth (Manrique, 1927, 146). Sironj was another city known for its cotton textiles (Tavernier, 1925, 46).

It should be noted that cotton textiles were manufacture in many regions around the world before Industrial Revolution, but couldn't compete with Indian textiles in terms of quality and price.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to K.N. Chaudhury, "before the discovery of machine spinning and weaving in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Indian subcontinent was probably the world's greatest producer of cotton textiles" (Chaudhuri, 1974, 127). As a result, not only were Central Asian and Middle Eastern marketplaces filled with Indian textiles (Chaudhuri, 1974, 127), but a range of these fabrics, such as linen, silk, muslin, chintz (Ferrier, 1976, 205-206, note 118), and calico were accessible in a variety of quantities and quality in many foreign markets at comparably inexpensive rates (Steensgaard, 1999, 62; Varthema, 1928, 79). The prominence of Indian cotton textiles may be gauged from Tavernier's observations who mentioned that "there is a large trade in all kinds of colored calicoes, which they call chites, with which all the common people of Persia and Turkey are clad and which are used in several other countries for bedcovers and tablecloths" (Tavernier, 1925, 46).

Several references indicate Medieval Turan's reliance on India for consistent supplies of cotton textiles. Cotton fabric is included in Babur's list of items frequently carried from India to Turan's marketplaces in 1504-05 (Babur, 1922, 202). Furthermore, Anthony Jenkinson noted in 1558 that Indian merchants in Bukhara were engaged in the business of selling white fabric, which was used to make turbans and other garments (Jenkinson, 1886, 88). Similarly, the English traveler, Henry Bornford noticed in 1639 that the cotton output of the neighboring areas of Punjab was primarily carried to the marketplaces of Lahore for further transit to Turan by Uzbeks and Tartars.<sup>7</sup> Pazukhin's list of items demanded in the Khivan market places in 1671 includes Indian cotton at the top (Clarke, 1876-77, 220). Furthermore, seventeenth-century diplomatic letters by Bukharan Khans written on behalf of Bukharan merchants to Indian monarchs demonstrate the Turanian need for Indian textiles, in which the Bukharan Khan urged bilateral economic exchanges and emphasized the need for Indian textiles in Bukhara.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Varthema noticed Indian products in Central Asia from as far as Bengal and Gujarat and many of these Indian goods, according to him, also made their way to Tartary, Persia, and Turkey (Varthema, 1928, 79).

Edward Pettus, an officer of the East India Company, testifies to the Iranian reliance on Indian fabric. He noted, "thebannians, the chief merchants whoevendelinene of India, of all sorts and prices, which the countrye cannot be without, except the people should goe naked" (Ferrier, 1976, 192). The availability of high-quality Indian fabric in the marketplaces of the northern Iranian town of Kazwin was documented by Cartwright in the early seventeenth century (Purchas, 1905, 506-7). Thus, a modern scholar, NielsSteensgaard while demonstrating the importance of Indian textiles in Iranian markets stated that a considerable number of camels come to Isfahan each year, the majority of which are carrying Indian cotton (Steensgaard, 1999, 62).

In respect of Turan and Iran's production capacities, it is worth noting that cotton was grown in both regions, but they couldn't compete with Indian varieties. Turan's local cotton production does not seem to have been a substantial export item till the mid-nineteenth century when it emerged as a part of the Russian empire (Lipovsky, 1995, 529). Due to lack of adequate irrigation facilities, Turanians allocated a large proportion of their land to the cultivation of grains and other food products and is evidenced by the comments of Arminius Vambray, a Hungarian traveler, who glamorized their usage of irrigation networks for the abundant production of fruit and grains (Vambray, 1970, 469-73). Iranians, on the other hand, made coarse calicoes, but they have been relatively of low quality and costed more than the Indian variety which is attested by the observations of John Chardin. He pointed out that, "Persians make calico cloth very reasonable, but they make none fine because they have it cheaper out of the Indies that they can make it ..... they understand also the painting of linen, but not so well as the Indians, because they buy in the Indies the finest painted linen so cheap, that they would get nothing by improving themselves in that manufacture" (Chardin, 1927, 278-79). The comparative advantage that the Indian textiles have over Iranian textiles is the subject of Chardin's remark. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that Shah Abass I attempted to reduce reliance on Indian textiles by boosting local production, but he was unable to do so due to a lack of sufficient irrigation infrastructure. The statement is supported by the observations of Pietro Della Valle, who stated that "Shah Abass tried to reduce his imports of Indian textiles by encouraging the growth of cotton in Persia and increasing Persian silk exports, however, contemporary attempt at import substitution was unsuccessful" (Ferrier, 1976, 206, note 118). On the other hand, huge swaths of fertile land in north India, along with a large population, have outweighed Iran's and Turan's cotton production capability.

Multiple reasons contributed to the availability of Indian cotton textiles in local and international markets (Raychaudhuri, 2009, 269-71; Naqvi, 1974, 154-59). First, because

the Mughal Empire ruled over a vast productive Gangetic doab with a high population and natural irrigation, due to which the economy's potential as well as industrial and agricultural goods increased (Richards, 1993, 190-91). As a result, Indian agricultural production, especially cotton, grew dramatically, boosting the textile sector (Habib, 2009, 163-71). Secondly, the boost of Indian agriculture was also due to the keen interest of Mughal rulers in providing incentives to farmers for producing such profitable cash crops as cotton, indigo, sugar, and opium. It is worth noting that the Mughal emperor's primary tool for agricultural growth was revenue concessions. For example, if the land had been left uncultivated for few years (or new land was put to cultivation), it was charged half of the revenue or even less in the first year when it was farmed (Habib, 1999, 293-95). After then, the rate was raised every year until the full amount was achieved in the fifth year. Another major way of stimulating cultivation was the advance of Taqavi loans (Richards, 1993, 190). B.R. Grover notes that "crops such as indigo, sugar-cane, cotton, oilseeds, and opium were in heavy demand for export as finished industrial products to foreign markets," and the farmers producing these cash crops received considerable incentives from Mughals (Grover, 1966, 129).

Finally, the cotton textile sector saw several breakthroughs and improvements.<sup>9</sup> Direct block-printing was developed and the loom was upgraded with horizontal frame and foot-treadles to regulate the shedding mechanism (Habib, 1980, 6-10; Ramaswamy, 1980, 277-41). Furthermore, the availability of relatively high quality but low-priced Indian dyes aided the development of the Indian textile industry (Naqvi, 1974, 155-56). All these factors resulted in Indian textiles being both high quality and low priced. The assertion is substantiated by John Chardin, the French traveler, in his seventeenth-century description of the cotton textile industry of Iran. He observed that, while the Iranians manufactured some low-cost calico, they had little incentive to grow their textile sector into higher quality products since they are unable to make textiles that are similar in price to Indian textiles (Chardin, 1927, 278).

### **Productive Capacity and the Magnitude of Trade**

The nature of sources is a significant obstacle while considering the production capacity of the Indian textile industry, and it seems to be impossible to properly document the capacity of the Indian textile sector. However, according to Josef Brenning's calculations, an average weaver household produced nearly 1,379 yards of fabric per year, implying that the annual productive potential of the East Godavari Delta's 7500 looms was 9,653,000 yards of cloth.<sup>10</sup> Hameeda Khatoon Naqvi while pointing out the geographical spread of weaver households across the subcontinent noted that, "no city, town, paraganah, casbah

or village seems to have been devoid of this industry" (Naqvi, 1974, 155-56). Naqvi's claim has been further reinforced by the findings of Pelsaert, that cities like Patna, Benaras, Lahore, Multan, and Allahabad, as well as "Chabaspur and Sonargaon with surrounding villages and indeed as far as Jagannath, live on the weaving industry, and the produce has the highest reputation and quality" (Pelsaert, 1925, 8). Thus, based on the above figures, it may be concluded that India's textile sector had a massive output capacity, the output of which was exported to different regions like Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, besides putting some of it to local use.

Regarding the size of Indian textile exports to Iran and Turan, lack of statistics is once again a major stumbling block. Although there are some estimates of English East India Company's records, they only apply to the marine trade, not the overland commerce.<sup>11</sup> As a result, dependence must be placed on certain travel accounts and Dutch records, from which an idea may be derived to document this relation. Thus, according to a 1640s report, about 25,000 to 30,000 camel loads of cotton fabrics were transported from India to Iranian marketplaces each year (Steensgaard, 1999, 62; Steensgaard, 1974, 410). These figures are the highest and on average, 12,000 to 13,000 camel loads of textiles were exported overland every year.<sup>12</sup> Given that each camel carried an average of 195 kg, (which is almost 125 pieces) the figures imply that Iran acquired 2340 to 2535<sup>13</sup> tonnes of Indian cotton textiles each year during this period, both for local use and export to markets in Turan,<sup>14</sup> Russia, Ottoman empire and beyond (Deloche, 1993, 238). So the approximate value of annual textile exports to Iran by overland was nearly four million rupees.<sup>15</sup> The approximate value of textile exports to Turan can not be determined because there are no estimates as were available for Iran.

Thus, it appears that as textile production was huge, so were exports, leading many scholars to exaggerate the importance of textile exports to Central Asia in particular, to the point where it was thought that Indian textiles and indigo were sufficient to entice Central Asian horses, and thus the Mughals did not need to export bullion. As a result, it has been emphasized that the trade balance favored India, an arbitrary and imprecise measurement. Stephen Dale, for example, claims that evidence of monetary export to Central Asia is scarce and that Indian cotton textiles, indigo, and sugar were sufficient to fund the purchase of tens of thousands of Turkic horses (Dale, 1994, 26). Furthermore, Scott Levi, believed that "the magnitude of the trade still placed the balance of Indo-Turanian trade in India's favor" (Levi, 2002, 84). However, in light of historical data demonstrating the enormous significance of the value of the horse trade, the arguments of these scholars need to be re-examined.

Thus, Scott Levi's remark that "pre-colonial Turan's reliance upon India for cotton textiles is analogous to India's dependency upon Turan for horses" (Levi, 2002, 77), undermines his thesis. Furthermore, the fact that no hoards are containing Mughal coins in Central Asia does not mean that bullion was not used to purchase war horses. Rather, evidence suggests that a large number of Mughal coins, both gold, and silver, have been unearthed in Central Asian coin hoards. Though they have been linked to Shah Jahan's Balkh expedition (Bhandare, 1-15), many of the coins discovered date from the first two Mughal rulers (Dale, 1994, 26). Moreover, the horse trade was so lucrative that Jos Gommans estimated its annual value at "roughly twenty million rupees", which was three times more than the value of "Dutch and English East India companies" annual exports from Bengal (Gommans, 2019, 89). It should be noted that Mughals imported nearly 33,061 horses annually from Iran and Turan, the value of which is approximately 19.18 million rupees.<sup>16</sup>

Given the horse trade's annual turnover, it is fair to assume that Mughal money was well utilized to fund the Mughal horse imports, which is further confirmed by the minting of Khanis at the Mughal empire's north-western mints. Although a significant amount of bullion obtained through trade was brought to mints to be coined into rupees and muhrs (Foster, 1921, 302; Bernier, 1916, 202-03; Ovington, 1929, 132; Khan, 1965, 304-08; Tavernier, 1678, 8-9; Thevenot, 1949, 25-26), evidence also suggests that in Gujarat, a portion of the bullion was coined into Mahmudis, a regional issue circulating in certain parts of the province, and similarly, in the empire's north-western mints, a substantial portion of the bullion was minted into Khanis (Lahori, 1868, 562-63; Thevenot, 1949, 253; Ovington, 1929, 132), circulating in Balkh and Badakhshan. Furthermore, a farman of Jahangir's time attested to the flow of money from India. Thus in a Parwana (Parwana-i-Rahdari or pass or a kind of passport), he writes "Kamran Beg has been deputed with a sum of money from the imperial treasury to purchase superior quality horses and other high-class merchandise from Iran and return to the court" (Islam, 1979, Cal. no. J.51.1).

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the Mughal economy, which was huge, had tremendous export potential. Cotton textiles and indigo were major export commodities that were shipped to many foreign markets. Central Asia, which was next to India, also imported a huge amount of textiles since it was essential for them, and these regions were deficient in textile production for a variety of reasons. Although textile exports from India to central Asia were significant, however, given the nature of our sources, it should not be overstated. On the other hand, it should be noted that thousands of Central Asian horses could not be purchased solely based on textile exports; as a result, the Mughals needed to export currency to obtain

those war machines. Thus, to think that the balance of trade was in favor of India or Central Asia is very difficult to propound and needs further historical investigation.

**End Notes:**

1. Since 1843, numerous explorers have defined the word "Central Asia" from their own perspective. Initiated by Alexander Von Humboldt no concrete definition of the term has arrived and it is supposedly believed that large land mass should not be restricted to the present day five republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan but includes a large land mass which includes, despite these five republics but includes Mongolia, Xinjiang Afghanistan, Sind and Kashmir along with the trans Caucasian states of Armenia and Azerbaijan etc. Turan and Iran have been utilised in place of Central Asia in this study for a better understanding The term Turan signifies the territories controlled by the Shabanid Uzbeks and Iran signifies the territories controlled by the Safavids. Iran was included in the research owing to its proximity to Turan and the fact that their borders were intermittent during the medieval period, due to which it is not possible to draw academic borders. (Miroshnikov, 1992, 479-80: Kaw, 2017).
2. There were several routes connecting India to Iran and Turan, but those crossing via Kabul, Kandahar, and Kashmir were significant. (Rather and Abdullah, 2021, 84-93).
3. The name "chintz," which was initially used in Gujarat, Khandesh, and Rajasthan regions of western India and was derived from "Chitta" meaning "Spotted fabric," first appeared in commercial records as "chint" (singular) and "Chintes," (plural), and subsequently as "chintz." The word was first used to painted and printed cotton cloth, but it was eventually expanded to encompass furnished textiles in the late seventeenth century.
4. Kashmiri shawls were in high demand across Central Asia and beyond. According to Mohan Lal, in 1840s Kashmiri shawls were in such high demand in Russia that a trader named Mullah Rahim Shah carried Kashmiri shawls worth 17,000 rupees to Moscow, where he sold them for 34,000 rupees besides paying 200 rupees in transit duties. (Mohan Lal, 1846, 142).
5. Both MuzaffarAlam and Chetan Singh highlight considerable urbanisation in Punjab during this period, particularly along trade routes going to India's northwest frontier. Similarly, C.A. Bayly observes that the number of commercial towns in the north Indian province of Awadh increased between 1660 and 1750. This, he says, was due to an increase in movement of goods and the increased concentration of merchant groups. (Alam, 1994, 222; Singh, 1991, 173-203; Bayly, 1990,122).
6. Henry Martyn mentioned that Indian products were very cheap. (Henry Martyn).



7. Bornford described Lahore as "prime city of traffick in India," and goes on to report that, in Lahore, these commodities "are bought by Wousbecks (Uzbeks) or Tartars and soe transported by Cabull into those parts" (Foster, 1912, 135).
8. The letter was most likely written by Abdul Aziz Khan and addressed to Aurangzeb. It went on to say that the merchant Mubarak had to be sent back to Bukhara as soon as he procured the requisite textiles. (Burton, 1997, 450; Levi, 2002, 80-81).
9. According to AbulFazl, Emperor Akbar supported Kashmir's shawl industry and introduced dyeing the Tus shawls. (AbulFazl, 1873, 91).
10. Brenning's estimations are based on the weavers of Coromandel Coast during late seventeenth century. According to Richards, a weaver household's yearly output was between 1,300 and 1,500 yards of fabric per year. (Brenning, 1986, 343; Richards, 1993, 343-44).
11. In one of the estimates of 1661, the value of cotton textiles sent to Iran solely from the Gujarati port of Surat was one million rupees. (Chaudhuri, 1978, 196-97; Chardin, 1927, 278-79).
12. The figure is based on the average of estimates from various travel accounts of first half of the seventeenth century. (Coverte 1631: 49; Purchas, 105: 272; Foster, 1921, 260; Foster 1926: 446).
13. The figure was determined by calculating the average load a camel could carry. During Akbar's rule, the quantity that camels could carry was determined by their size classification. Camels were divided into three categories: the smallest could carry 6 man (148 kg/325 pounds), the second could carry 8 man (198 kg/435 pounds), and the third could carry 10 man (247 kg/543 pounds). (AbulFazl, 1873, 148).
14. It should be stressed that Turan acquired textiles not just through Kabul but also through Iran.
15. The price rate has been taken from a Dutch report of 1634, where 2.6 rupees were equivalent to one piece of cloth. (Steensgaard, 1999, 69).
16. The figure is arrived by putting the value of imported horse as 580 rupees. (Habib, 2009, 367; Inayat, S. and Zaidi, A. 1981, 270).

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