

Some Aspects of Trade and Commerce in Early Medieval Kashmir

By

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Abstract

The study attempts to explore the trade dynamics of early medieval Kashmir with a special focus on the Kārkoṭa, contrasting the prevalent decline in North Indian trade during this period. Kashmir's prosperous trade environment is exemplified by a stable coinage system and its strategic location, connecting the Indian subcontinent with Europe through the Silk Route. The study explores Kashmir's trade history, emphasising its substantial interactions with Rome and other regions. It examines both internal and external trade aspects in Kashmir. Internally, organised markets (hattas) and a variety of traded commodities like grains, wine, saffron, and metalware indicate a vibrant local trade. Rivers, especially the Jhelum, played a key role in facilitating this trade. Externally, Kashmir engaged in active commerce with neighbouring countries, exporting items like saffron, costus, and woollens. The study examines key trade routes to adjacent nations, in which the main western land route from Baramulla to Gandhara was used by Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang in the 7th century and King Saṃkaravarman in the 9th century, emphasising their historical importance in trade and cultural exchange. Besides the challenges faced by traders, including violence and robbery in Central Asia and along trade routes, are also addressed. Efforts by rulers like Candrāpīḍa and Lalitāditya to secure these routes and protect traders are explored.

Keywords: Early Kashmir, Kārkoṭa, Inter-External Trade, Difficulties, Silk Route

Introduction

From the mid sixth century when Kashmir emerged as a powerful empire there are, clear indications of unprecedented prosperity in Kashmir, expansion and enhancement of transborder networks; and circulation of technology, art, ideas and human agents—all cumulatively suggesting the phenomenal growth in size and volume of Kashmir's foreign trade. Barring coinage (gold and silver coins used for external trade), the evidence to this effect is, however, mainly circumstantial till the assumption of power by the Kārkoṭa. From the Kārkoṭa period onwards, there is direct evidence that Kashmir was an important constituent of mercantile cosmopolis comprising India, Middle East, West Asia, China and Central Asia, leading to the emergence of a rich trading community which, besides importing and exporting the goods, acted as a powerful agency of cultural exchange.¹ There were many reasons for this development. The first and the foremost factor in this regard was the

emergence of Kashmir as a vast empire extending on the one side with the Silk Route and on the other with the Indian plains. According to the Chinese Annals, at the time of the accession of Kārkoṭa to power, Kashmiri rulers controlled the route from China to Kabul.² Hiuen Tsang, who visited Kashmir in 631 CE, found all adjacent territories on the west and south down to the plains, subject to the sway of the king of Kashmir.³ In expanding the frontiers of Kashmir empire, Lalitāditya broke all previous records. The creation of a vast empire evidently facilitated the movement of goods and offered a vast market to the traders.⁴ At the same time, for maintaining the vast empire, a well-equipped large army and a sizeable bureaucracy was a prerequisite. To that end, it was necessary to recruit a large number of people and also to import more horses and elephants as well as raw material for making arms.⁵

Clearly, besides directly giving impetus to foreign trade, the creation of a vast empire also increased the number of people with a good purchasing power. The exposure of the ruling class and the soldiers to different cultures during the long period of their conquests in India and Central Asia, about which we have graphic information in *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, created a demand for these peculiarities in Kashmir.⁶ What is more important, the riches, which the Kashmiri rulers obtained by plunder and tribute while denuding the neighbourhood, enormously enriched the treasure of Kashmiri rulers leaving a direct impact on boosting trade. The riches, on the one hand, generated the need for luxuries exercising a demand for foreign goods, and, on the other hand, it enabled the ruling class to create the symbols of their grandeur and greatness, increasing the number of buyers or further enhancing their purchasing power. The wealth earned from war also encouraged the rulers to give land grants liberally to religious institutions⁷ and their guardians,⁸ which expanded as well as enriched the middle and upper classes.

Although we don't have a full picture of the imports and exports of the period, we are informed that in Kashmir there were "merchants of different wares coming from all regions."⁹ The sources are replete with the liberal use of gold, silver and copper in making images and statues of gods, goddesses and the Buddha.¹⁰ The richest even possessed lamps formed of jewels (*manidipika*).¹¹ Since these metals, except for a small quantity of copper, were not locally available, they were obviously imported from neighbouring countries. Importation of war horses from different neighbouring territories, namely, Yarkand, Tukharistan and Kamboja had increased manifold during the period.¹² The use of China silk is corroborated by both the literary and the sculptural evidence.¹³ It is, therefore, no wonder that Kashmir had become a meeting ground of foreign merchants. Evidently, the business opportunities in Kashmir were so alluring that some of the foreign merchants made Kashmir as their permanent abode.¹⁴

The best example of the increasing trading activity of the period is the presence of a prosperous trading class. Nona, a merchant from Rohtak, who subsequently settled in Kashmir, was so rich that even the King Durlabhaka-Pratapaditya II, with whom he had developed a close friendship, was 'astonished by his extravagance and huge wealth.'¹⁵ Nona also built a *matha* called Nonamatha for the accommodation of the brahmanas who visited Kashmir from his homeland—Ruhitaka (Ruhtak).¹⁶

It becomes evident that Kashmir's prosperity dates back to its early history. However, subsequent years witnessed a decline, primarily due to the Huna interregnum. This period saw a disruption in the Roman market and the silk trade routes. Similarly, the North-Western India experienced turmoil owing to the devastations inflicted by Tormāṇa and Mihirakula.

Following these events, the ascent of the Arabs marked another significant phase, as they endeavoured to seize control of the trade routes. This strategic shift led the Kāṛkoṭa kings to seek assistance from the Chinese emperor.¹⁷ It is pertinent to quote Rājatarāṅgiṇī which provides information about Lalitāditya:

Seized by curiosity to view lands which no one else had reached, he set out again towards the boundless regions of the north.

Even in those lands which, indeed, to this day have not been seen even by the rays of the sun, the command of this king met with no resistance.

Some have reported that he perished in the country called *Āryāṇaka* through excessive snow, which fell out of season.¹⁸

Thus probably Lalitāditya died in an effort to have control over those parts of southern silk routes which were connected with the valley. Because of these factors the Kashmiri traders had no option except to look for other avenues. And, in this context they tried to develop trade with Eastern India, via Tibet and Nepal. In this context we have plenty of references to the items of trade viz., *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, *Nilmatapurana*, *Kuttanīmatam*, *Samayamātrkā*, *Narmamālā* and *Deśopadeśa*. These sources provide insights into the variety of goods transported from Kashmir to other parts of India, various Asian countries, and Rome. They also shed light on the items imported into the valley. Among the Kashmiri exports, the most notable were saffron, Kuṭha (costus), and woollen products. The study examines both the internal and external aspects of the trade practices during this era.

Internal Trade

The concept of organised markets or *hattas* prevalent in various locales within the Kashmir valley indicates a vigorous internal trade from the earliest times. Kalhaṇa, notes that Pravarapura II established well-organised markets in the city of Pravarapura, situated on the right bank of the river Jhelum.¹⁹ He mentions King Nara's establishment of Narapura, a town noted for its well-stocked markets. This emphasises the strong association between the development of large towns in Kashmir and the flourishing of markets.²⁰ The commodities involved in this internal trade encompassed a range of goods including food grains, grape wine, saffron, cattle, iron implements, earthenware, bronze and copper utensils, leather products, and various agricultural and industrial items. The urban centres within the valley, such as Puranadhisthana, Shamkarapattana, Avantipura, Parihaspura, Jayapura, and Surapura, emerged as key commercial hubs. Kalhaṇa specifically identifies Shamkarapattana as a renowned centre for cattle trade and cloth weaving.²¹ Besides, a market named Kamalahatta was established in Parihaspura by the queen of Lalitāditya.²² The river Jhelum and its tributaries played a crucial role as conduits for this internal trade, with many ancient cities and towns of Kashmir prospering along its banks. During the early medieval period, Kashmir maintained extensive trade connections with various regions of India. Historical sources from this era provide significant insights into the range of commodities that were highly sought after outside the state, including saffron, kutha (costus), woollen items, salt, and wood. These items represent the key elements of inter-state trade at the time.

Saffron:

Barring a few casual references, sources are silent about the exports from Kashmir. From a passing reference in *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, it becomes quite clear that Kashmir exported victuals to far-off lands, and in this trade Kashmiri traders took active part. While narrating

the events of eleventh-century Kashmir, Kalhaṇa refers to one Jayaka who, by selling victuals as a trader to far-off regions, became in course of time a rival to the lord of wealth (*Kubera*).²³ The victuals were most probably saffron, rice, oil, honey etc. Kashmir was so much famous for saffron and its export that it came to be called in Sanskrit literature outside Kashmir as *Kaśmira* or *Kaśmiraja*. A guild of South Indian merchants, calling itself the Five Hundred Masters of Ayyavole, mentions saffron especially among the goods it had in trade in the Kannada and Tamil countries.²⁴ Stein mentions the special attention given to saffron cultivation over other products in the valley, famously noting its rarity in heaven but commonality in Kashmir.²⁵ This esteemed status of Kashmiri saffron is further emphasised in Harsa's *Ratanavali*, which notes its preference over varieties from Persia (*Parasikas*) and *Bahlikas*, indicating its renown in the Indian market.²⁶ The primary cultivation site for saffron was in Padampur (modern-day Pampur), a fact still recognised today.

The superior quality of Kashmiri saffron is also mentioned in the *Nilamata Purana*.²⁷ Literary references, such as in the *Kuttanīmatam*, suggest its value and utility in trade, where it was exchanged for goods and money, used in cosmetics, and recognised for its medicinal properties.²⁸ Dāmodaragupta's narrative of an officer's son using saffron for bodily application and Kṣhemendra's mention in *Narmamālā* and *Deśopadeśa* of its use in dyeing clothes and as ink, further attest to its varied applications.²⁹ The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang corroborates the abundant cultivation of saffron in Kashmir from ancient times and details its multiple uses.³⁰ He describes its role in adorning oxen during autumn festivals, its transformation into perfumes for worshipping Buddhist images, and its application in decorative and culinary arts. The value of saffron to Chinese and Tibetan monks, both for ritualistic purposes and in dyeing robes, further emphasise its cultural and religious significance.³¹

Oilseeds:

The limited large-scale production of oilseeds in Kashmir rendered them significant in the valley's trade dynamics. Historical sources from this era do not present evidence of oil workers, implying that oilseed cultivation and oil production were not predominant occupations in the region. However, the use of oilseeds, such as sesame and white mustard, is documented in the *Nilamata Purana*, indicating their presence and utility. The oil derived from these seeds found applications in religious practices, particularly in the worship of deities, which is significant given the prevalence of temples in the valley.³² This religious use of oil indicates its value as a commodity. This value is further illustrated by references to oil being presented as a gift, as in the instance of a trader offering oil to the courtesan Kankali.³³ Another mention of a trader gifting a small quantity of oil along with two pounds of salt indicates oil's comparative importance, considering that salt typically held less utility than edible oil. Given Kashmir's geographic and trade connections with Punjab and other parts of the country, it is inferred that the region likely sourced its oil from these areas.³⁴ This trade in oilseeds and oil, albeit on a non-large scale, reflects the adaptability and resourcefulness of the Kashmiri trade network in meeting local demands through external sources.

Betel Nuts and Leaves:

Another item which suggests the extensive trade contact of the valley with other parts of the country was betel nuts. The consumption of betel nut in Kashmir served two primary purposes viz., its use was prevalent in religious rituals, particularly during *pūjā* ceremonies, a practice prevalent in the temples of valley.³⁵ Besides, betel nuts were commonly consumed with betel leaves (*tāmbūla*). Historical texts from the region frequently reference the

Kashmiri habit of chewing betel leaves.³⁶ Kalhaṇa, for instance, notes the presence of betel-bearers (tāmbūlakaraṅkavāhini) employed by the wealthy to constantly supply tāmbūla.³⁷ Receiving betels directly from the king was regarded as an honour, reflecting the cultural significance of this practice.³⁸ The significant popularity of betel leaves in Kashmir can be discerned from a notable episode involving King Ananta of Kashmir. This account reveals the king's profound fondness for betel leaves, to the extent that he purportedly surrendered nearly the entire country's revenue and ultimately mortgaged his crown to a betel leaf trader.³⁹ While this narrative appears to be more legendary than historical, bordering on exaggeration, it nonetheless confirms the undeniable importance of betel leaves in the region. The very inclusion of this story, albeit embellished, in historical discourse affirms the prominent role that betel leaves played in the socio-economic fabric of Kashmir.

It is observed that neither betel leaves nor betel nuts were native to the Kashmir valley. While betel leaves could be obtained from the nearby plains, betel nuts were not locally produced and were likely imported from distant regions such as Bengal, where their cultivation is still prevalent.⁴⁰ And, since, we know that Bengal (Gauḍa as known in those days) and Malabar region in south had very close relations with the valley since the time of Lalitāditya and Konkan region (territories on the Malabar coast) is specifically mentioned as the areas full of betel nut trees.⁴¹ We have to believe that it was perhaps brought from Bengal and Malabar coast. Later on it was also obtained from the Karnataka region which developed contacts with Kashmir during the time of King Harṣa.⁴²

This aspect of Kashmir's economic history reveals the lengths traders went to in procuring commodities like betel leaves and nuts from remote locations. The transportation of fresh betel leaves to Kashmir was a challenging task, likely involving methods of preservation. It also implies that traders, while catering to specific demands, probably also brought other commodities from the coastal regions, reflecting the comprehensive nature of trade practices. The trade in betel leaves and nuts, therefore, is not only a testament to the cultural preferences of the Kashmiri people but also a significant indicator of the valley's expansive trade network and economic interactions.

Indigo and Ivory:

Dāmodaragupta mentions that indigo held considerable value among the people of Kashmir, potentially even surpassing that of saffron.⁴³ It seems that indigo was a prominent commodity and was imported into the valley. Indigo was likely sourced from Gujarat, which further indicates the valley's trade connections with other regions.⁴⁴ Ivory work started in the valley when Kashmir had developed trade relations with Nepal, which supplied Ivory to Kashmir.⁴⁵ As a result of this trade, the Kashmir valley gained renown for its intricate and skilled ivory work, marking a significant development in the region's artisanal and trade history.

Salt:

Salt has been a valuable commodity in Kashmir, primarily due to its necessity to be imported from external sources.⁴⁶ Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranṅiṇī* corroborates the absence of local salt sources in the valley, indicating the reliance on imports mainly from Punjab and Ladakh, a practice that continues to this day.⁴⁷ The significance of the Salt Range in Punjab, which extends to present-day Pakistan across the Indus River, is particularly noteworthy as a vital source of salt for Kashmir. The Pīr Pantsāl (Pir Panjal) route was predominantly used for transporting salt from Punjab to the valley, with Kṣemendra identifying a section of this route

as lavaṇasāraṇi or salt road, signifying the vibrancy of the salt trade.⁴⁸ This source also notes that salt was transported through Shurapura (modern Hurapura), part of the Salt Range.⁴⁹

Rājatarāṅgiṇī provides ample evidence of the flourishing trade, particularly in salt, within the valley. It notes the migration and settlement of traders from various regions into Kashmir.⁵⁰ One notable merchant, Nona, from *Rauhīta deśa* (likely modern Rohtak in Haryana), is mentioned. His name implies his specialisation in the salt trade, an evidently lucrative business. Nona's affluence is further illustrated by his establishment of *Nonāmantha* to accommodate *Brāhmaṇas* from *Rauhīta* land and his accustomed luxurious lifestyle.⁵¹ This lifestyle is portrayed through an anecdote where the soot from lamps in King *Duralabhaka Pratāpāditya II*'s palace caused him discomfort, in contrast to the jewel-based lamps (*maṇidīpikā*) he used at his own residence.⁵² *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* mentions:

Once the king invited him in a friendly way to the royal palace, and honoured him for one day with polite attentions such as befit a king.

When the king with kindness inquired in the morning as to his being comfortable, he said that the soot from the lamps had caused him headache.

When then the king was once in turn invited by him, and stopped at that [merchant's] house, he saw [there] at night lamps formed of jewels (*maṇidīpikā*).⁵³

The narrative also mentions a significant social transition, where Nona's wife eventually became the queen of the king and the mother to one of the most important rulers of the valley, King *Lalitāditya*.⁵⁴

Spices:

Historical texts from Kashmir, spanning both early and later periods, detail the presence of various spices such as pepper, dried ginger, asafoetida, camphor, and cardamom.⁵⁵ These spices, traditionally procured from South India and coastal regions, have played a key role in Kashmir's trade history. While contemporary production of camphor occurs in regions like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, historical evidence suggests its earlier import from Bengal and the coastal areas of South India. Cardamom is still produced in coastal regions alone. The use of asafoetida, pepper, and other spices in Kashmir, despite their non-indigenous nature, indicates imports from external sources, likely Afghanistan and eastern India.⁵⁶ *Kalhaṇa*'s reference to the use of camphor as a perfume further implies its cultural importance.⁵⁷ This evidences the expertise of Kashmiri traders in leading caravans and sourcing these commodities from various parts of the country, including the coastal regions.

However, the established trade connections of Kashmir with Bengal and Karnataka, while substantial, were not solely responsible for the variety of spices in the region. This leads to the conclusion that Kashmir maintained broader trade networks, encompassing other parts of South and eastern India, to access such a diverse range of spices.

Sandalwood:

The *Nilamata Purana* provides insight into the varieties of sandalwood (*chandana*), specifically identifying three types: *rakta*, *sita*, and *kaleyaka*.⁵⁸ This text also makes mention of the use of sandal paste, applied to the body post-bathing, indicating its cultural and hygienic significance.⁵⁹ *Kalhaṇa*, mentions the utilisation of sandalwood in both religious rituals and everyday life. However, there is no evidence to suggest that sandalwood was

indigenous to the Kashmir. The term *chandana-dri*, referred to in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, implies ‘sandalwood mountains’, implying a geographical origin outside Kashmir.⁶⁰ This source further clarifies that sandalwood was imported into Kashmir, predominantly from the regions surrounding the Kaveri River and the Malabar hills.⁶¹

Copper:

Copper, as a metal integral to daily life, was widely utilised in the fabrication of utensils and religious idols. Kalhaṇa reveals that the use of copper extended beyond utilitarian purposes to the minting of coins, a practice traceable to the reign of Toramana in the sixth century CE.⁶² *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, further mentions King Jayapida’s issuance of copper coins following the acquisition of a significant quantity of copper.⁶³ Geologically, the valley lacked copper ore deposits, necessitating the import of copper from external sources. Initially, Punjab served as the primary supplier of copper to Kashmir. However, following disruptions in Punjab due to foreign invasions, the sourcing of copper shifted. Nepal, through Ladakh, emerged as an alternate route for transporting copper to the valley.⁶⁴ This change in the supply chain further points to the adaptability and resilience of Kashmir’s trade network in response to regional geopolitical shifts.

More importantly, Kashmir also exported flowers to India as they were considered important for religious rituals. According to Al-Biruni, “Every day they brought there (Somnath Temple) a jug of Ganges water, and a basket of flowers from Kashmir.”⁶⁵

External Trade

Analysing the historical context of Kashmir’s external trade, it becomes evident that the region maintained longstanding commercial relationships with neighbouring countries. The distinct products of Kashmir were in high demand beyond the Indian subcontinent. Concurrently, Kashmir also functioned as a significant marketplace for foreign rarities, importing a considerable array of commodities in exchange. The dynamics of Kashmir’s external trade, encompassing both exports and imports, can be delineated as follows:

Kutha (Costus):

Kutha, or costus, emerges as a preeminent commodity in the trade narratives of Kashmir. Its applications were diverse and culturally significant, including the perfuming of shawls, formulation of ointments and medicines, enhancing the aroma and flavour of food, wine preparation, and the preservation of fruits.⁶⁶ Given its value, Kutha was in high demand, especially among the Romans, and was exported to Rome through key trade centres like Patal, Barbaricum, and Barygaza.⁶⁷ Pliny acknowledged the distinctive bitter taste and sweet fragrance of Kutha, noting the availability of two varieties at Patal, located at the Indus River’s entrance.⁶⁸ The demand for Kutha extended beyond Rome, finding a market in various other countries. Hiuen Tsang also mentioned Kutha, identifying it as a medicinal plant cultivated in Kashmir.

Horses:

Cavalry⁶⁹ was central to the tactical viability of the army of the period, and therefore essential for the strength and stability of the state, which is why the import of horses was the chief item in the commodity structure of Kashmir’s foreign trade. This is also borne out by the details we find on cavalry in the sources besides the direct references regarding the drain the import of horses caused on the state exchequer.⁷⁰ The *Lokaprakāśa* speaks of a veterinary doctor, a specialist in horse diseases and an expert in the science of horses and cows.⁷¹ It further lists various breeds of horses and their stables.⁷² The horse trainers (*Aśvaśaliya*)

received largesse from the king.⁷³ The existence of a specific official position, *aśvaghāsakāyastha*, responsible for overseeing the fodder of horses, indicates the importance of equine resources.⁷⁴ Stein notes that horse fodder was primarily sourced from the lakes and marshes around Srinagar. This fodder, being state property, was subject to taxation, further indicating the strategic and economic significance of horses in Kashmir.⁷⁵ The establishment of the office of *aśvaghāsakāyastha* was not only a testament to the value placed on horse care but also to the broader role of horses in the military and economic framework of Kashmir.

It appears that they purchased horses for the state, maintained them and trained them for their use in wars. The importance of cavalry can also be inferred from the fact that Kṣemendra devotes most of his work, *Nitikalapatru*, to the varieties of horses, their respective qualities, movements, diseases and the heavily armoured cavalry.⁷⁶ The rulers of Kashmir were very keen to enrich their army with the best breed of horses and the import of such horses must have cost the state exchequer exorbitantly. Writing about Saussala (1112–1120 CE) Kalhana says, “Being fond of new works and of possessing many horses, the artisans and foreign horse dealers grew rich under him.”⁷⁷ Both literary and archaeological evidence confirms that the superiority of cavalry determined the political fate of a ruler or those who contested for the throne.⁷⁸ *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* gives a vivid picture of the use of mounted archery in the battles and a breathtaking number of cavalry forces of the rulers.⁷⁹ Therefore, RS Pandit rightly remarks that “the twelfth century was pre-eminently the century of the knight and the steed, both rider and mount being protected by armour in Kashmir as in other lands.”⁸⁰ Horses were also gifted to the favourites and brahmanas.⁸¹ Regarding the direction of supplies, we have evidence that the war horses were imported from Kamboja (eastern Afghanistan), and Balkh and Badakhshan.⁸² There is also mention of yearly import of horses from “Sindhu, Afghanistan, Bactria and Sogdia areas.”⁸³ It seems that a selected breed of horses was imported from Khotan and Yarkand and then was made to inter-breed locally to produce a good stock.⁸⁴

In addition to horses, elephants were also an important part of the army.⁸⁵ Lalitāditya and Jayapida maintained a huge elephant corps. Not surprisingly, then, one section of *Nitikalapatru* is devoted to the description of elephants and their characteristics. The areas which were the main source for the supply of elephants were Kalinga, Gauda (Bengal), Vindhya Pradesh and Assam. The Himalayan belt too supplied elephants.⁸⁶

Chinese Silk:

The indigenous literature of Kashmir, spanning the early and early medieval periods, contains numerous references to the use of Chinese silk, emphasising its significance in the region. The *Nīlmata Purāṇa* offers some of the earliest mentions of silken cloth.⁸⁷ Further, Dāmodaragupta in his *Kuṭṭanīmata* refers to garments made from cotton (*kārpāsa*) and Chinese silk (*Cīnāmbara*), indicating the luxury associated with Chinese silk.⁸⁸ For instance, in the *Kuṭṭanīmata*, a government official’s son is described wearing a gold-embroidered yellow cloth, and a courtesan receives garments made from Chinese silk (*Cīnāśuka*) from an admirer.⁸⁹ These references attest to the high esteem and widespread use of Chinese silk in Kashmir from early times, a trend that continued into the early medieval period. Kṣemendra’s works, including *Samayamātrkā*, *Deśopadeśa*, and *Narmamāla*, provide detailed descriptions of various types of silk worn by the people, specifically mentioning *Cinavastra*, a term denoting cloth from China.⁹⁰ The prevalent use of Chinese silk suggests its regular importation in substantial quantities. Silk Route, which refers to the trade routes connecting

China with various countries in Asia and Europe, reinforces China's role as a principal silk exporter.

The indigenous variety of silk (kiao-she-ye) which is mentioned by Hiuen Tsang, seems may not have matched the quality of Chinese silk.⁹¹ Indian traders exported Chinese silk to Western countries via the Silk Route through Central Asia. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* also identifies the ports of Barbaricum and Barygaza as key nodes for exporting Chinese silk and silk thread to the Western world.⁹² It is likely that Chinese silk was imported into Kashmir via the southern Silk Route, after which it, along with other Kashmiri export items like saffron and costus, was transported to Barbaricum and Barygaza. From these ports, these goods were then distributed to various global destinations, illustrating the integral role of Kashmir in the ancient silk trade.

Cotton:

Hiuen Tsang, observed that the inhabitants of Kashmir traditionally wore garments made of white linen. However, the absence of any historical evidence for the cultivation of cotton within the Kashmir valley suggests that cotton was likely imported. This inference is supported by references in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, where it is mentioned that the cotton cloth produced in Ceylon (Simhala) was favoured by the queen of Kashmir.⁹³ The textiles imported from Simhala were distinguished by their variety of designs and superior quality, indicating the external influences on the textile culture of Kashmir and the valley's participation in wider trade networks.

Gold and Precious Stones:

Kashmir's affluence in precious stones is notable, encompassing gems like corundum, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds.⁹⁴ Specifically, the sapphires from the Zanskar region in Ladakh were esteemed for their high quality. From as early as the first century CE, sapphires, beryl, and corundum were notable exports from Kashmir to Rome. Both the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* and *Narmamala*, note that the use of ornaments made of diamonds and pearls was not only a fashion statement but also intertwined with the belief in astrology.⁹⁵ People adorned these gemstones to counteract the perceived malevolent effects of stars. Kalhaṇa, records that King Harṣa of Kashmir possessed expertise in crafting new designs with precious stones.⁹⁶

It was the fad of the royalty to possess jewels and jewellery, and have images of worship made of jewels. When Kalasa set on fire the stores of his father (king Ananta), only a few things could be recovered of which Kalhaṇa specially mentions a *linga* made of jewel. The queen Suryamati sold it to the wealthiest traders of the time, namely, Takkas for 70 lakhs of dinars.⁹⁷ The royalty had become so familiar with the jewels that they could not be deceived about their intrinsic value. Writing about Kalasa, Kalhaṇa says that "No seller of goods could cheat him as he purchased jewels and other things personally and according to their intrinsic value."⁹⁸

Perhaps Takkas and similar international businessmen traded with jewellery. Jewels were most probably brought from Central Asia, especially from Badakhshan, which continued to be the supplier of jewels to Kashmir into the late medieval period as the term *La'li'Badakhshan* (jewel of Badakhshan) is in common usage in Kashmir. That Kashmir was an important market of jewels is also substantiated by the place name Lal Bazar (the market of jewels) in the outskirts of Shahr'i Khas (historic Srinagar).

When Kalasa set on fire the stores of his father “so much gold and other valuables the king got out from the ground below the heaps” that, according to Kalhana, “its mere mention nowadays [Kalhana’s own days] engages our curiosity.”⁹⁹ Not only the king but the whole rich section of the society invested in purchasing gold ornaments. Indeed, in early times the acquisition of ornaments in gold and silver was the only popular form of effecting investments. It was the royal privilege to mark the gold according to quality and price which served to bring to light the savings of the people. It was a kind of assay for articles of gold which enabled the officials to estimate the private means of individuals. According to Kalhana, during the reign of Ananta, Haladhara, the prime minister, abolished this practice “knowing that succeeding kings would endeavour to seize through punishments and other means this accumulated wealth.”¹⁰⁰

Gold in dust and coins, and silver ingots and coins were traditional items of imports from Chinese Turkistan.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Kashmir’s affluence in precious stones is notable, encompassing gems like corundum, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds.¹⁰² Specifically, the sapphires from the Zaskar region in Ladakh were esteemed for their high quality. From as early as the first century CE, sapphires, beryl, and corundum were notable exports from Kashmir to Rome. Both the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* and *Narmamala*, note that the use of ornaments made of diamonds and pearls was not only a fashion statement but also intertwined with the belief in astrology.¹⁰³ People adorned these gemstones to counteract the perceived malevolent effects of stars. Kalhana, records that King Harṣa of Kashmir possessed expertise in crafting new designs with precious stones.¹⁰⁴

Wool:

Kashmiri shawls, renowned globally, were extensively exported to distant places. However, the local production of high-quality wool was insufficient to satisfy the demand from Kashmir’s looms, necessitating the import of shawl wool from neighbouring regions. Ladakh emerged as a key supplier of sheep’s wool to Kashmir, and initially, Tibet provided the fine wool (pashmina) required for these shawls.¹⁰⁵ Over time, as demand escalated, even Tibet’s wool supply proved inadequate. Consequently, additional wool imports were sourced from the Changthong and Turfan districts in China.¹⁰⁶ Before the closure of the route to Leh by the Chinese authorities, wool-laden caravans traversed the Kashgar-Yarkand-Leh route to reach Kashmir.¹⁰⁷ Given the valley’s climatic conditions, woollen goods were produced on a large scale. Despite a decline in external trade during certain periods, internal trade within the region remained robust. C. E. Bates’ compilation of imports from Leh to Kashmir includes wool among the listed commodities.¹⁰⁸ Wool traders often exchanged their raw wool for finished shawls, which they then profitably sold in Central Asian markets. From there, these products made their way to major cities across Asia and Europe. Pashmina shawls and wool were also exported to Western countries like Rome and Egypt, significantly contributing to the inflow of gold into the country.

Some Other Items:

Kalhana identifies the musk deer as a notable item of trade from Kashmir. This animal is native to the high mountain plateaus to the north and east of Kashmir.¹⁰⁹ E. H. Warmington provides further geographical context, noting that the musk deer is found in the Himalayan ranges, extending from Gilgit eastwards across Tibet, northwestern China, and Siberia.¹¹⁰ He also remarks on the regional variations in the value of musk, with the highest quality coming from China, followed by Assam, Nepal, and Central Asia.¹¹¹ Spikenard, another export from Kashmir, is an aromatic plant thriving in the high altitudes of the

Himalayas. Its dried roots and stems were utilised in medicines, perfumes, cosmetics, and cookery. This product was exported to Western markets through Barygaza.¹¹² Lycium, derived from the Raisin barberry in the Himalayas, was another export product. Noted for its yellow colour, it was transported to Barbarican through the Indus and Barygaza.¹¹³ The Romans imported Lycium for its use as a yellowish dye and for medicinal purposes, including treatments for sore eyes and inflammation, as well as in cosmetics. As documented by Pliny, Lycium was traditionally packed by Indians in the skins of camels and rhinoceroses.¹¹⁴ Marco Polo, in the 13th century, observed that coral, imported from the western parts of the world, found a lucrative market in Kashmir.¹¹⁵ This observation indicates Kashmir's role not only as an exporter but also as an importer of valuable commodities, reflecting its strategic position in historical trade networks.

Important Trade Routes

The primary trade routes in Kashmir, which connected to adjacent nations, have been documented in both foreign travelogues and local literature. These routes were likely the main conduits for trade and commerce with other regions. The foremost western land route originated in Baramulla and led to Gandhara. In the 7th century CE., the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang travelled to Kashmir via this route. Kalhana, mentions that King Samkaravarman's (883-902 CE) military campaign against Urusa utilised the same route.¹¹⁶ We get another confirmation about this route from Alberuni's *Kitab-ul-Hind*, who describes this route as the most renowned entryway into Kashmir.¹¹⁷ This western pathway was crucial for Kashmir's trade, linking it to ancient trade networks extending to Central Asia and China. The Central Asian route fostered commercial and cultural exchanges between Kashmir, Central Asia, and China. The silk trade route, in particular, facilitated significant cultural and trade interactions. Besides, Buddhist monks travelled to China using these routes.¹¹⁸ Many Chinese pilgrims entered Kashmir from the west, including Jinagupta, who journeyed through key trading locations like Nagarahara, the Bamiyan range, and ultimately reached Khotan.¹¹⁹

Another notable route extended from the northern shore of Wular Lake, passing through the contemporary village of Atawatt and Vijjemary, towards the star and Balti territories along the Indus. This path was traversed by Chinese travellers such as Fa-Hien (399 CE), Che-nong (900 CE), Fa-yong (420 CE), and Ou-King.¹²⁰ This route also maintained Kashmir's trade connections with the Darad territory. A third vital route commenced in eastern Kashmir, leading towards Ladakh, Tibet, and China, signified by the current Zoji-La pass. This pass was instrumental in the political, cultural, and commercial exchanges between Tibet and Kashmir.¹²¹ Kalhana notes that during winter, when the northern route from Darad to Kashmir was impassable, this route through Bhautta land was utilised for travel to Kashmir. Besides, several routes in southern Kashmir penetrated the Pir Panchal range, linking the region with the rest of India. The Banihal pass, situated on the eastern end of the range, served as a crucial connection with the hill states of East Punjab.¹²²

Problems of Conveyance

In the early medieval Kashmir, despite a flourishing trade, individuals engaged in commercial activities encountered numerous obstacles. Sources of this period reveal that the Central Asian region was notorious for violence and banditry. Notably, groups like the Khaśas inhabiting the regions around Rājapurī (Rajouri) and Mlecchas on the north-west were infamous for their predatory behaviour against traders.¹²³ The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, recounts the tale of a formidable bandit leader operating near Gaya in Bihar. This individual, who

caused significant distress to travellers, was eventually neutralised by a chief from Kashmir, thereby liberating the eastern region from such threats. However, it is suggested that this individual might have been a skilled thief rather than a ruling chief.¹²⁴ The perilous conditions for merchants, who often faced terror and intimidation from robbers, are also corroborated by the *Kathasaritsagara*. Sources indicate that monarchs such as Candrāpīḍa and Lalitāditya made concerted efforts to enhance the security of these trade routes, aiming to safeguard the merchants and their goods.¹²⁵ Lalitāditya is said to have tried to gain control over the Central Asian routes. He is said to have defeated the Tibetians, invaded the Tarim Basin and Crossed the Taklamakan probably to reach and conquer Kucha and Turgan in the Central Asian deserts.¹²⁶ The sole purpose of all this was to have a hold on the said routes as they provided access to the markets of the west as well as China.

Conclusion

The study explores that despite some decline in trade during the early medieval period, Kashmiri traders persevered in their commercial endeavours, with challenges. The limited arable land in the valley necessitated a reliance on trade over agriculture, a contrast to other parts of the country. Efforts by rulers to augment agricultural productivity through infrastructure like canals and dams did not significantly alter this dependence. The study sheds light on various commodities exported from Kashmir to different regions within and outside the country with notable items being saffron, Kuṭha (costus), and woollen goods. The principal trade routes from Kashmir to neighbouring countries, well-documented in both foreign travel accounts and indigenous literature, played a vital role in facilitating this commerce. The prominent western land route from Baramulla to Gandhara was historically significant, as noted in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang and in Kalhaṇa's records. Alberuni's *Kitab-ul-Hind* also references this route, emphasising its importance in linking Kashmir with Central Asia and China, thereby fostering cultural and commercial exchanges. Other significant routes included the northern passage from Wular Lake to the Indus valley, traversed by Chinese travellers like Fa-Hien and Ou-King, and the eastern route leading to Ladakh, Tibet, and China through the Zoji-La pass. These routes facilitated not only trade but also cultural and political interactions. The study also explores the challenges faced by traders, including the prevalence of violence and robbery in Central Asia and along trade routes, as mentioned in historical sources like *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* and *Kathasaritsagara*. Kings such as Candrāpīḍa and Lalitāditya made efforts to secure these routes for safe passage of traders. Despite these adversities, Kashmiri merchants remained engaged in their trade activities, demonstrating their resilience and the integral role of trade in the region's economy.

Notes and References

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³ Hiuen Tsang. *Ta T'ang-Si-Yu-Ki*, [629 AD]. Eng. tr. by Sameul Beal under the title *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Vol. I, London: Trubner & Co., 1911, pp. 136, 143, 147, 163.

⁴ Kalhaṇa. *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, IV. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV. 405–407, 415.

- ⁶ Ibid., IV. 147.
- ⁷ Ibid., IV. 5, 9, 181.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid. IV. 11.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., IV. 196–203
- ¹¹ Ibid., IV. 15.
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- ¹⁵ Ibid., IV. 16.
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- ³⁵ *Nilamata Purana*, V. 898.
- ³⁶ Dāmodaragupta, *Kuttanīmatam*, text and Hindi translation by A.Vidyalankar, Varanasi, Indological Book House, 1961, V. 740.
- ³⁷ Kalhaṇa. *Rājataranṅiṇī*, IV. 427.
- ³⁸ Ibid., VIII. 2054.
- ³⁹ Ibid., VII. 190–195.
- ⁴⁰ Jamwal, Suman. *Agriculture and Commerce in Early Medieval Kashmir*. p. 99.
- ⁴¹ Kalhaṇa. *Rājataranṅiṇī*, IV. 159.
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- ⁵² Ibid., IV. 13–16
- ⁵³ Ibid., IV. 13–15.
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- ⁶⁹ The cavalry was called *hayasena* and the rider *hayaroha*. The commander of the mounted soldiers was known as *ayasenapati* or *hayapati*. One who commanded 10,000 (*ayta*) horses and 1,000 men was known as the lord of horses (*asvapati*).
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- ⁹³ According to Kalhaṇa, when Mihirkula recognised that his queen who was wearing the jacket made of cloth from Simhala marked with golden prints, he flamed up in anger. When told on inquiry by the chamberlain that the cloth made in Simhala marked up with a stamp of the king's foot, he thereupon set out on an expedition. (Kalhaṇa. *Rājataranṅiṇī*, I. 294–5).
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- ⁹⁵ Ibid., IV. 331.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., VII. 921–931.
- ⁹⁷ Kalhaṇa. *Rājataranṅiṇī*, VII. 414.
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- ¹²⁵ Jamwal, Suman. *Agriculture and Commerce in Early Medieval Kashmir*, p.53. Candrāpīḍa had sent an embassy to the Chinese Court to seek its help against the Arabs who had begun to overrun the areas which fell on these trade routes.
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