



Review Paper

Kandahar during seventeenth Century: A study in the strategic and commercial importance

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Abstract

The brisk interregional rather intercontinental trading activities through a network of overland routes during medieval ages led to the emergence of several halting places. One such place, which constituted a pivotal significance for the Mughals of India and the Safavids of Persia, was Kandahar. Dotted with numerous halting places, Kandahar attained significant commercial and strategic position, during period under study. In this context, the present paper is an attempt to contextualize Kandahar's commercial cum strategic importance for both India and Iran and explore whether the route passing through this region was a leading commercial route or only a substitute, used for emergency purposes. The study argues that the route leading through Kandahar was one of the main routes between India and Persia, which was abandoned only in times of Mughal-Safavid rivalry just as the Safavid-Portuguese conflict over Hormuz diverted the sea trade through Kandahar.

Keywords: Trade, Strategic importance, Kandahar, Hormuz, Mughals, Safavids, Portuguese.

Introduction

India and Central Asia have historically found themselves connected through different channels, leading to the transmission of men and material from one region to other. This multi-dimensional movement culminated into mutual interdependence in diverse fields. In commercial sphere, both these regions were dependent on each other, as much needed commodities were not locally available. Therefore, the overland routes interlinking the two regions provided them with a way of exchanging the needed commodities. These overland routes passed through different areas and crossed Hindukush at different places, forming the major passes over formidable mountain range, like Bolan, Gomal, and Khyber, etc¹, prompted ruling elite to provide with different halting places (big or small), where provisions for traders and travelers were brought. Consequently, these halting places emerged as trading hotspots and attained commercial as well as strategic importance.

It is imperative to note that due to commercial transactions carried out across the north-western frontier of India, many trading hotspots like Multan, Lahore, Kabul, and Kandahar etc. developed². However, among them Kandahar occupied an important place on account of its strategic and commercial importance. On the one hand, Kandahar was connected to Shikarpur, Multan, Jaisalmer, Jaipur, and Jodhpur and the Persian cities of Herat, Kirman, and Isfahan, and on the other it was also connected to the ports of Thatta, and Bandar Abbas¹. Thus, due to its central position and the connectivity with

certain link roads leading to Kabul and Turan, political control over Kandahar was important for both Mughals as well as Safavids³. As a result, both Mughal and Safavid rulers made efforts to conquer it and bring it under their own sphere of influence.

Strategic Importance of Kandahar

As mentioned earlier that, Kandahar occupied a strategic position for both Mughals and Safavids and both of them tried to take it once the situation could arise which has been attested by many contemporary observers⁴. It is worthy to note that the strategic importance of Kandahar has been emphasized by many contemporary observers. For instance, Abul Fazl considered Kandahar and Kabul as the twin gates of India, since they commanded the routes leading to Turan and Iran respectively⁴. To delineate the strategic location of Kandahar, he writes:

It is situated in the third climate. Its length from Kalat Banjarah to Ghor and Gharjistan is 300 kos; its breadth from Sind to Farah is 260 kos. On its east lies Sind; to the north Ghor and Gharjistan. On the south Siwi, and on the west Farah; Kabul and Ghaznin on the north-east. Its mountains are covered with perpetual snow, which seldom falls in the city⁴.

On account of this strategic importance, Mughals left no stone unturned to make Kandahar as part of their empire and as a result followed a strong diplomatic and forward policy, which is reflected, from the captured of Kandahar in 1595.

It was because of Akbar's diplomacy that in 1595 Kandahar was surrendered by its Persian governor Muzaffar Husain Mirza to Mughals⁵. Although Akbar tried to appease Shah of Persia on the pretext that the conquest of Kandahar was an important step to assist Persia against Uzbeks⁵, however, this was simply easy eyewash to avert any animosity to secure diplomacy. Even after the conquest of Kandahar, Akbar, did not provide any assistance to the Safavids. Moreover, Akbar pointed out that although he wanted to conquer his own ancestral land of Transoxiana but owing to his friendship and agreements with Uzbek ruler, Abdullah Khan, he gave up this idea. Thus, Akbar tactfully, refused any sort of help to Shah. It seems that the Mughal emperor did not want the hostility of Uzbeks also, and wanted to maintain the balance of power and any liquidation of one power could disturb the balance of power, which could ultimately be dangerous for Mughals⁵.

On the other hand, Kandahar was equally important for Safavids. Despite commanding routes towards India and Kabul, Kandahar provided an alternate to maritime trade routes at times of conflict between Safavids and Portuguese. So Shah of Persia never gave up his claim over Kandahar and urged Mughal emperor to return his hereditary territory. It should be noted that the Shah of Persia considered Kandahar as his hereditary territory and urged that the Mughal emperor should return Kandahar to him. While talking to Khan e Alam who was sent with the embassy of Shah Abbas, yadgar Ali, in 1613 to the Persian court, the Shah maintained that:

My Friendship for the Emperor is too great to be injured by disputes over territory; but Kandahar is part of Khorasan, which is my hereditary territory, and men both near and far, seeing only the external appearances of this world and ignorant of the world of the spirit, utter senseless remarks in their assemblies and put an altogether different interpretation on my behavior. The Emperor's loves for me, therefore, and the interest of both parties, require that he give back to me, territory which is far away from the heartland of India⁶.

The crucial military and strategic importance, of Kandahar is also gleaned from the fact that both Mughals and Persians were compelled to deploy the massive forces in and around Kandahar in readiness since it was a difficult terrain and immediate assistance in winter was impossible especially for Mughals⁴. It is said that Mughals kept twelve thousand to fifteen thousand Horsemen at Kandahar⁷. While as Safavids kept nine thousand to ten thousand men⁸.

This strategic nature of both Kabul and Kandahar compelled Mughal emperors to establish strong control over Kabul and Kandahar which was largely dependent on the loyalty of Hazaras, who occupied a very large area, extending from the borders of Kabul and Ghazni to those of Herat on one hand and from the vicinity of Kandahar to that of Balkh on the other⁹. They lived in the mountainous region to the west and south of Kabul, a frontier outpost of Mughal⁴.

The Hazaras were a warring tribe and in fact were involved in looting and plundering the caravans passing through their territory. For example, Abul Fazl reported in 1599, that the Hazaras, a famous Afghan tribe, assaulted the Lohanis, who were regularly transporting horses to India from Ghazni. He further reported that, while the Lohanis fought back, they were ultimately forced to withdraw⁵. Thus, to establish control over Kandahar, Mughals fostered their efforts to subjugate Hazaras, which was considered per-requisite for the security as well as expansion of the northwestern frontier⁴. Moreover, keeping Kandahar outside its sphere of influence, Mughal control over Hazaras was not possible. This came true during the reign of Jahangir, when Kandahar was lost to Safavids and, Yalingtosh, the commander of Nazr Mohammad, mounted pressure on Hazaras and invaded the borders of Kabul. However, Zafar Khan acted promptly and Yalingtosh was defeated¹⁰. Therefore, Mughals followed both diplomacy and forward policy to retain Kandahar. They on the one hand kept the Safavids away from Kandahar for some time in their history, while on the other hand any insurgency from within the tribes of north-western frontier were crushed. At the same time, the Uzbek invasions under Yalingtosh were also repulsed back.

Commercial Importance of Kandahar

No matter who was in possession of Kandahar, whether Mughals or Safavids, they made every possible effort to promote and protect the overland trade, since it provided them with much needed commodities at cheaper rates. Moreover, European domination over maritime routes, also forced Mughals and Safavids to protect the Kandahar route. Pertinent to mention that, goods from Mughal India continued to reach Persia or beyond through Kandahar¹¹.

The commercial importance of Kandahar has been pointed out by many political chroniclers and travelers accounts. Babur in his memoirs refers to Kandahar as one of the important trading hotspots between India and Central Asia¹². Besides political chronicles, many travelers who passed through Kandahar route also acknowledged the commercial prospects of Kandahar and noted the presence of merchants not only from Mughal Empire but also from Iran, Turan, Turkey, and many other regions. For example, the commercial prospects of Kandahar can be gleaned from the observations of Steel and Crowther, who travelled through Kandahar route in 1615. They reported that some merchants "instead of going further into India for a profit of 20% traded their commodities at Kandahar itself"⁷. Subsequently, in 1621, Poser, who followed same route which was used by Steel and Crowther earlier, attested the observations, since he was impressed to see the busy trade of Kandahar, particularly the trade in cotton textiles from India¹³. Kandahar also benefitted from the amount of provisions consumed by these caravans during their stay. Therefore, the chief of Kandahar tried to detain caravans as long as he can.

Richard Steel claimed that the Caravans couldn't leave Kandahar without permission of its Governor, which caused them to stay a month or at least sixteen or twenty days¹⁴. The commercial prospects of Kandahar can also be gauged from the importance attached to Kandahar route by Iranian officials in the context of Safavid – Portuguese conflict over Hormuz. In one of the incident, it was discussed in the King's council of Persia that if a commercial dispute between them prompted English ships to interdict Iranian sea-born commerce, their economic interest would not be seriously damaged because they would have enough supply by the way of Kandahar.

As a result of brisk trade through Kandahar, it emerged as a high potential region since lot of toll was collected from the caravans. To quote Scott Levi, it was a "highly coveted and profitable possession" for both Mughals and Persians, since it provided them much revenue¹⁵. The assertion is further substantiated by The venot, who claims Kandahar as an important and a rich province of Mughal Empire which yielded much revenue. According to him, "The Trade that it hath with Persia, the Country of the Uzbeks and Indies, makes it very rich; and for all the province is so little, it heretofore yielded the Mogul betwixt fourteen and fifteen Million a year"⁸. Moreover, Richard Bell, an English traveller, also attested the assertion that "Kandahar was bringing large amount of revenue to the King of Persia after he recaptured it"¹¹.

Thus, the profitability of the Kandahar province motivated both Mughal and Safavid rulers to protect the trade routes passing through it. Besides suppressing, the unruly Afghan tribes, a constant source of threat for traders, every possible effort was put forward to protect the traders and make their way easy. It is reported that when the Mughal Emperor Akbar came to know that caravans en-route to Kandahar were continuously harassed by Afghan and Baluch tribesmen, he unleashed his army on them and thousands of tribals were killed or enslaved and exported for sale in foreign markets¹⁵. To improve and promote caravan traffic through India's northwest frontier Mughal Emperor Akbar is also said to have built a strong fort at Attock, which Tavernier counts among the best fortresses of great Mughals¹⁶.

Pertinent to mention that, both Mughals and Safavids appointed bands of highway police called *Rahdars* to patrol the roads and ensure safety of traders and travelers¹⁵. Commenting on the effectiveness of the Rahdari system of Safavids, Eskander Beg Munshi writes:

Throughout the Safavid Empire if any merchant, traveler or resident was robbed, it was the duty of the governor to recover his money or replace it out of his own funds. And in any case if the officials on the routes were found guilty, they too were not spared and were punished severely¹⁷.

This is also evident from the accounts of John Chardin, who mentioned that the Governor of Kandahar was brought to

Isfahan in chains, since he was accused of having been involved in the robbery of Caravans going to Mughal India¹⁸. Another important facility which attracted merchants towards Kandahar route was the easy availability of modes of transportation, since it was inhabited by Afghan mediatory traders, who facilitated trade by providing fine camels^{19,20}.

Thus, due to government policies, roads became safe and secure, which is reported by many observers. For example, Sikandar Munshi reported that because of the Shah Abbas's policies, highway robbers were eliminated and "with security restored to the roads, merchants and tradesmen traveled to and from the Safavid Empire"¹⁷. Abul Fazl too claimed that, "the roads became safe and hill and plain were united. Traders came from every side and things became cheap"⁵. While eulogizing the administrative measures of Akbar for the promotion of trade, Abul Fazl comments, "The helpless obtained a means of subsistence, the seekers of traffic obtained confidence, and world-traversers had security"⁵. Apart from political chroniclers, many travelers acknowledged the safety and security of roads during period under study and attributed the same to imperial policies of the Mughals and Safavids. To quote, Richard steel and John Crowther, "Afghan Robbers" became civilized mainly due to the efforts of Mughals"⁷.

Political Rivalry and Trade Diversion

Notwithstanding the fact that Kandahar remained cause of disagreement and over its possession several wars were fought between Mughals and Safavids. Political chronicles and travelogues reveal that commercial transactions between Mughal India and Persia continued except for the brief interruptions. According to Muzaffar Alam this rivalry had hardly impacted the overland trade²¹, however from some indirect references, negative impact of this political animosity is discerned²². It should be noted that the political rivalry between Mughals and Safavids during Akbar and Jahangir did not impact trade much, however, the political rivalry during the time of Shah Jahan did impact much on trade. For example, after Kandahar was taken by Safavids during the reign of Shah Jahan, he is said to have imposed ban on trade with Persia, both by overland and maritime route²³. The negative impact of political rivalry is also discerned from the decline of silver currency output from north-western mints of Mughal empire. For example, the annual average output from north-western mints during 1646-55, got reduced to 24.32 metric tons from 56.08 during 1636-45. On the other hand, the mints of Gujarat showed an increasing trend due to trade diversion created out of the political rivalry over Kandahar. For example, in comparison to 29.52 metric tons during 1636-45 it increased to 35.71 metric tons during 1646-55²⁴, since trade was temporarily shifted to maritime routes due to wars, just as maritime disturbance in Hormuz had pushed merchants to Kandahar route⁷, which is attested by the observations of Steel and Crowther, who travelled on the route during the second decade of the seventeenth century.

Steel and Crowther puts in these words, “for within this two years, that the way of Ormus is stopped up by the wars betwixt the Persians and Portugals, all Caravans which passe betwixt India and Persia, must of necessitie goe by this place”⁷. It is interesting to note that, even after the fall of Hormuz in 1622 to Persia, traffic on the Kandahar route did not decrease and Kandahar continued to grow in its importance. Regarding the commercial importance of Kandahar, Francisco Pelsaert in 1626 mentioned that Indigo was supplied through Kandahar and Isfahan to Aleppo²⁵.

Kandahar, therefore continued to grow in its importance, even the conflict between Persians and Portuguese over Hormuz increased trade through Kandahar, and also the capture of Hormuz in 1622, by Safavids, did not decrease the trade through Kandahar, which substantiates the argument that Kandahar was not simply a substitute or alternative route, rather it was one of leading routes in trade between India and Persia.

Magnitude of Trade

Although statistical data about magnitude of trade is deficient, yet stray references of contemporary travelers furnish important clues about the magnitude of trade. For example, in 1609, Robert Coverte while travelling with a caravan from Agra to Isfahan reported that seven or eight thousand camels carrying merchandise passed through Kandahar every year²⁶. Thomas Coryat travelling in 1615, describes a caravan between Isfahan and Mughal India containing two thousand Camels, fifteen hundred Horses, one thousand Mules, and six thousand people²⁶. Richards Steel and Crowther also refers passing of twelve to fourteen thousand camels loaded with goods through Kandahar each year both in winter and summer⁷. Sir Thomas Roe also mentions passing of twenty thousand camels yearly through this route towards Persia²⁷. Henry Bunford, an employee of East India Company who travelled from Agra to Thatta in March 1639 reports that the clothing from the town of Samana was directly exported to Spahan (Persian city of Isfahan) by the Persian and Armenian merchants through Kandahar²⁸.

The above assertion is further substantiated by a Dutch report of 1640s according to which about 25,000 to 30,000 camel loads of cotton fabrics were transported from India to Iranian marketplaces each year^{13,20}. Though, these figures were highest for the period, but based on the average estimate provided by various travel accounts of first half of the seventeenth century, it can safely be assumed that on average, 12,500 camel loads of textiles were exported every year from India to Iran (the figure is based on the average of estimates from various travel accounts of first half of the seventeenth century)^{29,27,7}. Given that each camel carried an average of 197 kg (based on the statistics provided in Ain of Abul Fazl)³⁰, the figures imply that Iran acquired nearly 2463 tonnes of Indian cotton textiles each year during this period, both for local use and export to the markets of Turan, it should be stressed that Turan acquired

textiles not just by Kabul but also through Iran, Russia, Ottoman empire, and beyond³¹.

Conclusion

The impressive magnitude of trade carried through Kandahar route leads to the conclusion that Kandahar remained a major route, linking India with Iran. The commercial significance of Kandahar was never minimized despite flourishing maritime trade during seventeenth century. The fact that Kandahar remained an important Commercial entrepot on the trade route between India and Iran is proved by an estimate of 1634¹³. Which reveals that the difference between the volume of trade through the ports of Gujarat and through Kandahar route was not much. Therefore, the strategic cum commercial importance of Kandahar compelled the two mighty powers of the region to work jointly for promotion of trade and safety of routes.

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