



# Trade in Multan during the Medieval Period: A Historical Overview.

Umar Nazir

Research Scholar

Centre of Advanced Study Department of History

Aligarh Muslim University

Email: 7umarnazir@gmail.com

## Abstract:

Multan played a significant role as a centre of trade and commerce in the sub-continent's North-west frontier region through the ages. During the pre-Mughal period, it played a crucial role in the external trade of India and it continued to play a prominent role during the Mughal period as well. The purpose of this study is to trace the origins of its prominence as a commercial centre, as well as the numerous commodities of its import and export, and to what extent and in what manner commerce and manufacturing sectors were fostered. This study will also focus on the historical processes which led to the emergence and development of Multani mercantile community in and outside Indian subcontinent.

**Keywords: Multan, Trade, Persia, Barani, Multanis.**

It is commonly known that geographical elements have had a significant impact on Indian history, as Patricia Kendall states that geography reigns supreme in India. It establishes political borders and sets commerce channels.<sup>1</sup> India's commerce over the north-west frontier had been going on for centuries. It had many trade routes connecting India with the land of Persia and Central Asia via Kabul and Qandahar. A number of cities and towns emerged as trading centres among which Multan was prominent. It was situated on one of the overland routes of Mughal North India and controlled most of the external trade of India during the period under study.<sup>2</sup> The upper caravan route of the North West frontier region known as the Salt range (Kuh-i-Jud) was not secure since it was plagued by the volatile hill tribes like as Khokhars, Janjuahs, and Awans. As a result, the caravan merchants continued south of the Salt range towards Multan. Multan, thus acted as a centre of trade and commerce connected India with the land beyond Hindu-Kush.<sup>3</sup> It was also served by the

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Kendall, *India and the British*, London, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of Mughal Empire*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> S. H. Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History*, Bombay, 1939, p. 34.

three rivers namely the Indus, the Ravi, and the Chinab which provided transport facilities for a flourishing trade.<sup>4</sup> It attracted the merchants of central Asia and ‘here came the traders from across the border with rich manufacture of Balk and Bhukhara and the luscious fruits of Samarkand and Qandahar.’<sup>5</sup> It has mentioned that the city of ‘Multan was the large and thickly populated town. Its comforts were abundant, the prices were cheap and its inhabitants had considerable wealth.’<sup>6</sup> It was witnessed by the Arab geographers, Al Masudi who visited city of Multan in 915 A.D. According to him, ‘there was active commerce between Multan and other parts of the Muslim world. Trade caravans passed between Multan and Khurasan, she had communications with Zablistan and Sijistan by way of Ghazni and Qandahar.’<sup>7</sup> Istakhri visited Multan in 951 and wrote about it. Abul al-Qasim Muhammad bin Hawqal also wrote about the commercial activities in Multan.<sup>8</sup> Both of them confirm the views expressed by Al-Masudi and relate that it was a busy town and had separate bazars for various commodities and merchandize, the ivory and copper goods being conspicuous. The bazars were crowded with customers all the time. Prices were low and within the reach of the common man.<sup>9</sup> Maqdasi visited Multan in 985 A.D. and confirms that it was an active trading centre. It is mentioned ‘the traders of Multan were honest in their dealings. They did not tell a lie in their transaction of sale and purchase nor did they weigh less than what ought to have to be weighed. They treated travellers courteously.’ Trade was so flourishing that by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, according to Al-Biruni, Multan merchants were engaged in trade up to Rajuri near Kashmir and throughout the territory the caravans travelled in perfect security.<sup>10</sup> It has also been observed from the contemporary sources that traders desired a well-established authority in the country so that their business should not suffer. Multan was well organized and well established city in the sense that required protection from the rulers. Merchants could travel freely throughout the country. The *Tarikh-i-Guzidah* stated how Mahmud of Ghazni by stratagem poisoned a gang of Baluch robbers who had plundered caravans going to India and extirpated their kinsmen.<sup>11</sup>

With the establishment of the Sultanate, a new chapter started in the history of trade and commerce of Multan. Trade requires fostering care and the sultans of Delhi, being aware of this fact, also took effective steps to provide peace and security which encouraged trade and commerce. *Gumashtahs* were appointed to take care of the trade routes. Sarais were always desired to be populated with a view to assist the traders so that the articles from distant places could come easily to them.<sup>12</sup> Aynul-Mulk Mahru tells us that caravans from different areas used to come here and exchanged goods in the local market. Multan presents spectacle of a flourishing urban economy.<sup>13</sup> Such an economy must have necessitated commerce on a large scale. Surely Indian goods had a good market abroad and Indian merchants made huge profits and since coins at

<sup>4</sup> Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of Mughal Empire*, New Delhi, 1982, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Mirza Mohammad Wahid, *The life and works of Amir Khusrau*, Lahore, 1957, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Idrisi Al-Sharif, *kitab Nuzhat al-Mustaq*, tr. S. Maqbool Ahmad, Leiden, 1960, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Al Masu'di, *Muru'ju-l Zahab* in Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, London, 1867, vol. I, p. 23; Andre wink, *Al-Hind: The making of the Indo-Islamic World, Early medieval India and the expansion of Islam, seventh to eleventh centuries*, Leiden, 1990, vol. 1, pp. 166-89.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Ishaq Al Istakhraf, *Kitabu-l Akalim*, in Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, vol. I, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Al- Biruni's India*, tr. Edward C. Sachau, Lahore, 1862, vol. I, p. 208.

<sup>11</sup> Mustawfi Hamid Allah, *Tarikh-i Guzidah*, tr. Edward G. Browne, London, 1913, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Barton William, *India's Northwestern Frontier*, London, 1939, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Aynul-Mulk Mahru, *Insha-i-Mihru*, ed. Sheikh Abul Rashid, pp. 212, 213.

this period especially in foreign trade were not regarded as fixed standards of value, but rather as a form of merchandise, the Indian merchants obtained good quantities of gold and silver from foreign trade.<sup>14</sup>

Multan was the big market of commodity exchange. Arabian horses, raw silk, fruits and dry fruits were the profitable items of Import. Multan drew supplies for its consumption from quite distant places in India. Sugar was imported from Delhi and Lahore and Ghee from Sarsuti. Dry fruits and sliced melons were imported from the places like Khurasan. Ibn Batutah records that he presented some almonds and raisins to the governor of Multan which was one of the costly presents that could be made to the Indian chiefs, since those could not be had in Hindustan.<sup>15</sup> The large inland commerce was handled by a large and heterogeneous community of Multan. Barani records that a large amount of long distance trade was in the hands of persons called 'Multanis'. These Multani merchants were required to transport agricultural and other products from one part of the country to another on a very extensive scale because they had a large stock of bullock carts and intimate knowledge of the roads of the country.<sup>16</sup> They were so influential that a known merchant of Multan named Hamid al Din 'who from his grandfather had learnt nothing but the taking of interest', was made the chief qazi of Ala al-Din Khalji.<sup>17</sup> This personage was also respected in some Sufi circles as well. Barani states that mostly the Multanis were Hindus who were engaged in usury and commerce. They were famous for their large scale mercantile activities and were known for fabulous wealth. The secret of their prosperity was also in lending money to the ruling class who either because of the seasonal variations in the income from their revenue assignments or simply out of improvidence borrowed heavily from the 'Multanis and Sahs.'<sup>18</sup> Speaking of the nobles of Balban's time Barani says:

The Multanis and *Sahs* of Delhi who have acquired abundant wealth have derived it from the resources (*daulat*) of the old nobles (*maliks* and *amirs*) of Delhi. The latter took loans from the Multanis and *Sahs* beyond limit, and repaid the advances with largesses (by drafts) upon their *iqta's* (revenue assignments). The moment a *khan* or *malik* held an assembly and invited notables as guests, his functionaries rushed to the Multanis and *Sahs*, and giving them drafts upon themselves took loans at interest.<sup>19</sup>

This statement proves that the charity of the nobles was depending upon the money lending class and they always remained indebted to the Multanis and Sahs. Multani merchants remained important as Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji gave them money in advance from the state treasury to purchase goods from abroad and sell them in the Sara'i Adl at controlled rate. In return of this service they were to receive an allowance.<sup>20</sup> In this respect Multanis merchants were not traders in true sense of the term, but they worked as agents of the government. Ala al-Din Khalji advanced 20 lacs of *tankahs* to the Multanis, to enable them to supply finer goods to Delhi regularly. This was chiefly because of its geographical location. Multan served as main

<sup>14</sup> Lal Sarn Kishore, *Twilight of the Sultanate*, Calcutta, 1963, p. 283.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Batuta, *The Rehla of the Ibn Batuta, India, Meldive, Island and Ceylon*, tr. Mehdi Hassain, Baroda, 1953, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Zia ul-Din Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, ed. Sh. Abdur Rashid, Aligarh, 1954, p. 353.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 298-353.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Mahdi Hussain, *Tughluq Dynasty*, Calcutta, 1963, pp. 309-310.

halting station on the trade route and caravans were supposed to stop here while going towards Lahore, Delhi, Kabul and Qandahar. The government of Multan used to receive from them transit duty on mercantile commodities. Transit duty provided a great source of income for the rulers as Multan was a busy centre of trade. The city market never had a dull moment and the buyers were found ready. On the whole throughout the sultanate period there was no particular economic hardship even though it faced Mongol onslaught.

Multan maintained its legacy in the commerce and trade during the Mughal but its pattern was constantly changing with the passage of time although the changes were neither sudden nor glaringly perceptible. During the Mughal period Multan was a great market and halting place for the trade caravans, where the commodities of different nature were exchanged. Manrique, 17<sup>th</sup> century traveller described Multan a famous town for the caravan traffic. In his account, he says that 'Multan city, which, though but a practice of moderate size is nevertheless very wealthy, well stocked and plentifully supplied with all necessaries and conveniences man desires. This was due to the, it's being the halting place of all the cafilas coming from Persia, Corazane and other distant kingdoms. They passed in by this route to all parts of the Mogol empire in order to trade and sell their commodities, returning thence as a rule in company with the Mogol caravans or cafilas. This city is moreover one of the chief keys to this Empire as it is the doorway of the kingdom of Kandahar and Calabiche, the frontiers of the region of Ferra and Maxete, ruled over by the neighboring and inimical suffi.'<sup>21</sup>

Trade traffic with the land of Persia continued to flow in India via Multan and Qandahar. This is obvious from the recorded facts that Multan received various commodities from the different parts of the country and abroad. It had large and crowded markets. Multan itself didn't produce all the commodities but it received various articles in abundance. We find many references of the import of the horses during the period of study. Horses were the principle article of import. According to *Khulasat-al Tawarikh*, the merchants used to come via Qandahar bringing horses of Arab breed from Iraq and sell them at Multan.<sup>22</sup> It was the custom at Multan that on every horse was levied a tax of seven dinars and one fourth of the other commodities brought by the merchants were appropriated by the state. Multan was known for its agricultural produce and also for its industrial products. Multan was a great cotton producing area and it was its main export item. Manrique reveals that Multan was noted for the plenty of cotton.<sup>23</sup> Thevenot another traveller of the 17<sup>th</sup> century records 'The Capital Town which is also called Multan was heretofore a place of very great Trade, because it is not far from the River Indus; but seeing at present, Vessels cannot go up so far, because the Chanel of that River is spoilt in some places, and the Mouth of it full of shelves, the Traffick is much lessened, by reason that the charge of land-carriage is too great: However the Province yields plenty of Cotton, of which vast numbers of Cloaths are made. It yields also Sugar, Opium, Brimstone, Galls (from which a dye is obtained and which are collected and sold in the bazars.) and store of Camels, which are transported into Persia by Gazna, and Candahar, or into the Indies themselves by Labors ; but whereas the Commodities went

<sup>21</sup> Fray Sebastien Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique* (1629-1643) tr., by Lt. Col. C. Eckford Ward, London, 1926, vol II, pp. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Sujjan Rai Bhandari, *Khulasatu-t Tawarikh*, ed. Zafar Hasan, Delhi, 1918, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Fray Sebastien Manrique, op. cit., pp. 221, 238.

heretofore down the Indus at small Charges, to Tatta, where the Merchants of several Countries came and bought them up, they must now be carried by Eand as far as Surrat, if they expect a considerable price for them.’<sup>24</sup> *Khulasat-al Tawarikh* records variety of cotton goods in Multan. It had a speciality in manufacturing the multi-coloured printed cloth known as chintz.<sup>25</sup> It was very popular among the ladies of the upper class. People used to present it on different occasions and it was also exported to different countries.

Thus, we can say that the prevalence of high number of ‘Multanis’ indicate that Multan was an important commercial center during the period under review. It can also be said that flourishing trade was a great source of profit in Multan. Muslim kings, particularly the great Mughals, had of course given solidarity to these commercial transactions with the result that the imperial capital and provincial capitals like Multan and Lahore expanded. To understand their emergence as a mercantile community subsequently their role in Central Asian regions during the Mughal era, one should go beyond their activities during the Mughal Empire to the series of historical processes of the early Turko-Afghan period where their emergence lies.



<sup>24</sup> Surendranath Sen, ed., *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri*, Delhi, 1949, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Sujan Rai Bhandari, op. cit., p. 61.