



# 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 routs 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, 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 the regions were dependent on each other, as much needed commodities were not locally available. 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, etc.<sup>[1]</sup>, prompted ruling elite to provide with different halting places (big or small), where provisions for traders and travellers were brought. Consequently, these halting places emerged as trading hotspots and attained commercial as well as strategic importance.

Due to commercial transactions carried out across the north western frontier of India, many trading hotspots like Multan, Lahore, Kabul, and Kandahar etc. developed<sup>[2]</sup>. 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, while on the other it was also connected to the ports of Thatta, and Bandar Abbas<sup>[3]</sup>. 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 Safavids<sup>[4]</sup>. 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

Pertinent to mention that Kandahar occupied a strategic

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position for both Mughals and Safavids and both of them tried to take it once the situation could arise<sup>[4]</sup>. It is worthy to note that the strategic importance of Kandahar has been emphasised 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 respectively<sup>[5]</sup>. To delineate the strategic location of Kandahar, Abul Fazl 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 Ghazni on the north-east. Its mountains are covered with perpetual snow which seldom falls in the city<sup>[6]</sup>.

This strategic nature of 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 other<sup>[7]</sup>. They lived in the mountainous region to the west and south of Kabul, a frontier outpost of Mughal<sup>[8]</sup>. 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 withdraw<sup>[9]</sup>. Thus, to establish control over Kandahar, Mughals fostered their efforts to subjugate Hazaras, which was considered prerequisite for the security as well expansion of the north-western frontier<sup>[10]</sup>. 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, Yalingsh, the commander of Nazr Mohammad, mounted pressure on Hazaras and invaded the borders of Kabul. However, Zafar Khan acted promptly and Yalingsh was defeated <sup>[11]</sup>.

Moreover, Mughals left no stone unturned to make Kandahar as part of their empire and as a result followed a forward policy, which is reflected, from the capture 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 Mughals <sup>[12]</sup>. Although Akbar tried to appease Shah of Persia on the pretext that the conquest of Kandahar was an important step to assist Persia against Uzbeks <sup>[13]</sup>, however, this was simply an 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 Mughals <sup>[14]</sup>.

On the other hand, Kandahar was equally important for Safavids, since it commanded routes towards India and Kabul and 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 behaviour. The Emperor's loves for me, therefore, and the interest of both parties, require that he give back to me, his loving brother, territory which is far away from the heartland of India” <sup>[15]</sup>.

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 Mughals <sup>[16]</sup>. It is said that Mughals kept twelve thousand to fifteen thousand Horsemen at Kandahar <sup>[17]</sup>. While as Safavids kept nine thousand to ten thousand men <sup>[18]</sup>.

### **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 Hormuz, however, due to Portuguese control over maritime trade, the Persians were not able to reap the benefits of this lucrative trade passing through their territory, which forced both Mughals and Persians to invest on overland route through Kandahar and reap the benefits from trade passing through it <sup>[19]</sup>.

Besides, the commercial importance of Kandahar has been pointed out by many political chronicles and travel accounts. Babur in his memories refers Kandahar as one of the important trading hotspots between India and Central Asia <sup>[20]</sup>. Besides political chronicles, many travellers 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. Since, Kandahar was connected with frequent passage of caravan trade and was much bigger in size. 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 <sup>[21]</sup>. 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 India <sup>[22]</sup>. As a result, Kandahar 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 cannot leave Kandahar without permission of its Governor, which caused them to stay a month or at least sixteen or twenty days <sup>[23]</sup>.

Moreover, 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 incidents, it was discussed in the King's council of Persia that if a commercial dispute between them prompted English ships to interdict Iranian sea-borne 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 tolls 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 revenue <sup>[24]</sup>. The assertion is further substantiated by Thevenin, 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” <sup>[25]</sup>. 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” <sup>[26]</sup>. Moreover, merchant's also preferred this overland route since the safety of merchants and their merchandise was ensured by imperial mandate <sup>[27]</sup>.

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 caravan trade en-route to Kandahar were continuously harassed by Afghan and Baluch tribesmen, he unleashed his army on them and thousands of tribal's were killed or enslaved and exported for sale in foreign markets <sup>[28]</sup>. 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 <sup>[29]</sup>, which Tavernier counts among the best fortresses of great Mughals <sup>[30]</sup>. Situated on the Indus River, Mughal Emperor gave orders for its construction while the emperor was on his Kabul Campaign and it was completed in a short period of time under the supervision of Khwaja Shamsuddin Khafi <sup>[31]</sup>. 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 travelers <sup>[32]</sup>. To quote Eskander Beg Munshi:

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 severely <sup>[33]</sup>.

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 India <sup>[34]</sup>. 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 <sup>[35]</sup>.

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" <sup>[36]</sup>. Abul Fazl too claimed that, "the roads became safe and hill and plain were united. Traders came from every side and things became cheap" <sup>[37]</sup>. 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" <sup>[38]</sup>. Apart from political chroniclers, many travellers 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" <sup>[39]</sup>.

### 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 trade <sup>[40]</sup>, however from some indirect references, negative impact of this political animosity is discerned <sup>[41]</sup>. For example, after the debacle of Kandahar, Shah Jahan is said to have imposed ban on trade with Persia, both by overland and maritime route <sup>[42]</sup>. 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 1636-45, got reduced from 56.08 metric tons to 24.32 during 1646-55. On the other hand, the mints of Gujarat showed an increasing trend. For example, in comparison to 29.52 metric tons during 1636-45 it increased to 35.71 metric tons during 1646-55 <sup>[43]</sup>, due to the temporarily shifted to maritime routes due to war, just as maritime disturbance had pushed merchants to Kandahar route <sup>[44]</sup>. However, brisk trading activities on the route resumed quickly after the conquest was over. Moreover, the political rivalry of Safavids with Portuguese over the port of Hormoz also accelerated trade through Kandahar route which 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 necessity goes by this place" <sup>[45]</sup>.

The commercial importance of Hormuz can be gauged by the fact that not only a certain portion of European trade passed through it, but it also commanded a significant amount of trade between India and Persia. Therefore, considering the importance of Hormuz, the Portuguese governor, Albuquerque conquered it in 1507 and again in 1511 <sup>[46]</sup>. Although, the conquest of Hormuz by Affonso d' Albuquerque was motivated by the official policy of Portugal to bring about the complete overthrow of the Moorish trade <sup>[47]</sup>, however, the commercial importance of Hormuz also seems to have been a possible reason for its conquest. Thus, Portuguese conquest of Hormuz led to rivalry between them and Safavids and as a result forced the Safavids and Mughals to divert trade to overland route of Kandahar <sup>[48]</sup>, which is supported by the observations of Steel and Crowther <sup>[49]</sup>. Although Persians were unable to recover it since they stood little chance of wresting Hurmuz from the Portuguese without naval and military assistance <sup>[50]</sup>, however, soon with the help of English, Persians recovered it successfully in 1622. 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 Aleppo <sup>[51]</sup>.

### Magnitude of trade

Although statistical data about magnitude of trade is deficient, yet starry references of contemporary travellers while travelling with caravans 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 year <sup>[52]</sup>. 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 people <sup>[52]</sup>. Richards Steel and Crowther also refers passing of twelve to fourteen thousand camels loaded with goods through Kandahar each year both in winter and summer <sup>[53]</sup>. Sir Thomas Roe also mentions passing of twenty thousand camels yearly through this route towards Persia <sup>[54]</sup>. 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 Kandahar <sup>[55]</sup>. The 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 <sup>[56]</sup>.

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, the figure is based on the average of estimates from various travel accounts of first half of the seventeenth century <sup>[57]</sup>. Given that each camel carried an average of 197 kg<sup>[58]</sup>, 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 beyond <sup>[59]</sup>. On the other hand, during first half of seventeenth century, the difference between the volume of trade through the ports of Gujarat and through Kandahar route was not much. For example, an estimate of 1634 revealed that 211,000 pieces of textiles are shipped to Iran by way of Kandahar while as 383,000 by sea <sup>[60]</sup>. Therefore, the percentage of overland exports out of maritime was 55.09%, which is significant and cannot be neglected. Moreover, the figure implies that 35.52% of the total exports were carried through overland routes, while as 64.47% was carried through maritime routes. Thus, the route through Kandahar was one of leading routes linking India with Iran.

### 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 1634 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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