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## Grand Trunk Road: Continuity and Changes

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### Abstract

This article attempts to enhance the understanding of the reader about the historic, strategic and economic importance of the Grand Trunk Road. It further elucidates what potential it has in the present scenario and the purposes it may serve in time to come. The Grand Trunk Road has been central to the history of the Indian subcontinent, particularly of north India. Even after parcelling of the entire subcontinent into three separate nations, it serves as a vital route for trade and communication in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. It is a 'thread that binds the nations together'.

**Keywords:** Grand trunk road, continuity, historic, article attempts

### Introduction

Being one of the oldest roads of South Asia, the Grand Trunk Road, linking the eastern and western regions of the Indian subcontinent, has played a significant role in bringing together the people of the region. This passage has not only witnessed the trade of goods from one corner of the subcontinent to another, and to the rest of the world, but also helped in spreading culture, religion and other social strands to areas far and wide. It has significantly contributed in the political and economic life of India since the Mauryan period (322 BC–185 BC). It also helped the kings of the medieval period to keep India united and peaceful. Changes continued to take place in response to changing times and requirements. A comprehensive survey of the historical sources reveals that the present Grand Trunk Road that runs from Attock, *Bagh-i-Nilab* (In Punjab, Pakistan) to Sonargaon (In Bangladesh), was built by the order of Sher Shah Suri <sup>[1]</sup> between 1540 to 1545. He named the road *Sadak-e-Azam* (The great road). He also built a road connecting Agra to Mandu, Jodhpur and Chittor which related to the roads to Gujarat harbours.

This road was christened Grand Trunk Road by the British who improved the road. It provided an unbroken line of communication between Calcutta and Peshawar in the nineteenth century, stretching almost over 1,500 miles. Except in case of very wide rivers, the road was permanently bridged throughout. After Independence, the Government of India included this road in its National Highway network, and abbreviated it as NH-1 and NH-2 consequently <sup>[2]</sup>. It has been named Sher Shah Suri Marg to give due respect to its builder.

Approximately 2,600 km in length, this road starts at Sonargaon, in present day Bangladesh, heading through Kolkata, reaches Delhi via Varanasi, and then moves to Amritsar in Punjab, and later into Pakistan from where it is further connected with Kabul in Afghanistan.

### Historical importance

The Grand Trunk Road has been central to the history of the Indian subcontinent, particularly of north India. Even after parcelling of the entire subcontinent into three separate nations, it serves as a vital route for trade and communication in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. It is a 'thread that binds the nations together'.

The first historical evidence of this route is provided by Kautilya <sup>[3]</sup>, who refers to it as '*Uttarapath*' <sup>[4]</sup> (The northern route). Megasthenes <sup>[5]</sup> has identified eight stages on this route and has given detailed accounts of each of them, including the distances between them <sup>[6]</sup>. The Greeks called this the 'royal road' <sup>[7]</sup>. In the north-west, the northern route further extended to Balkh, which was an important trading centre where various trade routes converged. The route from Balkh to Taxila has been called by Kautilya as '*Haumavatapatha*'. An inscription at Sanchi mentions that the Buddhist monk, Kassapagola,

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used this route for preaching Buddhism in the Himalayas <sup>[8]</sup>. Did the GT Road exist before the time of Sher Shah? A close examination of the sources cannot confirm with certainty whether the construction of this road as a permanent passage had started before Sher Shah's period <sup>[9]</sup>. Though efforts were made to cover the country with a network of roads in the Sultanate period, even the Delhi Sultanate could not establish such a system. Only Balban tried to construct roads and eliminate highway robberies <sup>[10]</sup>. During the medieval period, the road provided a vital link for trade and communication across the Sur Empire. Gradually, roads brought forth important contributions in the economy of the empire; for example, the main roads were joined to *qasbas* (Urban settlement) in order to extend royal control to the villages and this made revenue collection easier. As the systems of local administration become firmly established, this in return gave more importance to the construction of roads to facilitate easy and fast communication. *Sarais* <sup>[11]</sup> were a very important part of this network. The rulers sought all details and other intelligence about travellers staying at these *sarais* from his network of spies and informers, which was valuable in crushing rebellions and facing external invasions, if any. For the safety, security and arrangements of the *sarais* an official, that is *Shahna*, was appointed. He was assigned to look after the requirements of the travellers and traders, who could have food at the *sarais* and stay there. There were separate arrangements for Muslims and Hindus. According to historian Abbas Khan Sarwani, government services were provided to those who stayed in these *sarais* according to their stature. Sher Shah also arranged for the fast movement of information from throughout the empire. Dak-posts were established on important roads including the GT Road. These posts used to operate from different *sarais*. Every *dak-post* had two horse-mounted messengers who passed the information received from nearby post to the king. Hussain Khan, who worked on the history of Sher Shah, says, "Roads must have definitely existed, but this kind of definitive system established by Sher Shah has no parallel in [The] ancient period."



**Photo:** One of the Kos Minar along the grand trunk road.

It is not surprising that wherever Sher Shah built a *sarai* along the Grand Trunk Road, soon *qasbas* also came up. Most of the *sarais* are now in dilapidated state and it is

This route continued to be in constant use during the Mughal period and was further fortified. Many cities and *qasbas* came up due to increase in trade and commercial activities in the period. The road systems initiated by Sher Shah served as a framework for Akbar's road building <sup>[12]</sup>. Mughal traders and armies frequently used this path. Jahangir's memoir *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* provides the geographical details of the Mughal Empire. In his memoir, Jahangir gives a detailed account of the total distance travelled daily, describes the postal system and clearly summarizes his *farmans* directing local *zamindars* and other officials to construct *sarais* and *kosminars*, and to plant shady trees <sup>[13]</sup>. Jahangir ordered a bridge to be built on the river Qudra near Shergarh. This bridge is still in use and the area came to be known as Khurramabad. Peter Mundy and Ralph Fitch, who travelled on this route, have provided some important details <sup>[14]</sup>. Peter Mundy informs us that Jahangir had given instructions to build *sarais* along the roads for the comfort of travellers. When Peter Mundy travelled on this road, he found that it was covered with shady trees on either side at a distance of 8–10 steps. According to Munirique, the area was surrounded with habitations and the route was well-equipped with *sarais* for the caravans <sup>[15]</sup>, some being famous such as Sarai Rani <sup>[16]</sup>, Sarai Puranderi <sup>[17]</sup>, and Sarai Bulaki <sup>[18]</sup>.

Mirza Nathan, a *mansabdar* in Bengal and a contemporary of Jahangir, has left a fascinating study of Bengal's political and social life in *Baharistan-i Ghaybi* <sup>[19]</sup>. His description of the communication system is valuable as he provides useful information about the postal system of Mughal India.

Before Sher Shah's regime there was not a single continuous passage that could be called the Grand Trunk Road, but the route itself was in use by travellers. Sher Shah, a pragmatic visionary par excellence, tried to connect the far-flung areas of eastern and northern Hindustan into a unity by constructing a road from Sonargaon <sup>[20]</sup> to Attock (In present day Pakistan), covering a distance of 1,500 *kroh* <sup>[21]</sup>. The primary purpose of building such a long-distance road was to facilitate the military, to help mobilize troops at and from any station. It was also to foster commerce and trade by providing good roads and safe passage resulting in higher revenue for the empire.

difficult to identify them, but the names of the habitations around the area have come to be associated with the *sarais* which once existed there. Sarai Kala is one such place.

### Strategic importance of the road through historical periods

The GT Road has played an important role in the process of urbanization of the northern India, since many *qasbas* and towns developed and flourished along it. This route also linked the strategic areas of the empire, where forts were built and subsequently many habitations developed, which are still extant. If we look at the process of urbanization in northern India, we find that the areas along this road are more developed in comparison to other areas in the same region. Historians still debate the question whether the areas were developed before or after the route was built. It is worth noting that the villages on either side of this road are mostly inhabited by Muslims. They were present at that time and still inhabit the area. Perhaps the reason is that the inhabitants of these rural areas were soldiers who were hired by the rulers.



Photo: Sarai in Kosi Kalan

In the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the only highway from Bihar to Bengal was the military road, which can be roughly traced even today. This road runs from the Kiul junction of Sahibganj along the course of the river through the Surajgarh plain, Munger, Bhagalpur, Coalganj, Teligarhi<sup>[22]</sup>. Sher Shah, while marching through the plain of Surajgarh, observed that the open nature of the terrain made the armies passing through it vulnerable to attack from any or all of the three sides. This is why he created an alternative route, which ran from the Jharkhand range. The *Tarikh-i-Daudi* records, “Sher Shah, intending to conquer Bengal, took the areas of the hills of Jharkhand via Tirhut (Gaya district), entered the jungles by a path which nobody had travelled (Before) and suddenly appeared before Gaur<sup>[23]</sup>.” The route followed by Sher Shah is not fully recorded in the Persian chronicle. ‘It may be assumed that he marched along the Rajmahal hills and entered the unexplored area called Jharkhand<sup>[24]</sup>.’ For Sher Shah, the region of Jharkhand served as a strategic route from Bihar to Bengal by providing for undetected manoeuvres. It was, therefore, of vital importance for him to develop a route for his military campaigns as well as to foster the trading activity through this region.

### References

1. One of the great rulers of India and the founder of the Shah Dynasty, Sher Shah Suri rose from the rank of *Jagirdar* to become emperor. His original name was Farid Khan. He became the emperor of India in 1540 and ruled for a short period till 1545. He organized a long-lived bureaucracy responsible to the ruler and a carefully calculated revenue system. It was during his reign that the relationship between people and the ruler was systematized for the first time. He efficiently administered the army and tax collections, and built many important roads, *sarais* (rest houses) and *baolis* (Step well) for his people. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/539997/Sher-Shah-of-Sur>)
2. According to the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) report, this road is listed as running over 1,453 km from Delhi to Kolkata.
3. Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, was a statesman and philosopher. This road is mentioned in his famous book *Arthashastra*. Kautilya became a counsellor and advisor to King Chandragupta (321 BC–297 BC) of the Mauryan Empire of India. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/313486/Kautilya>)
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5. Megasthenes, a Greek historian and diplomat, was born in c. 350 BC and died c. 290 BC. He authored an account of India, *The Indica*, in four books. He was sent by the Hellenistic king Seleucus I on embassies to the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta. He gave the most complete account of India, then unknown to the Greek world. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/373063/Megasthenes>)
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16. Newsletters, J Sarkar (BORS, 1931), vol. XVIII, p 345.
17. W C Macpherson, *Soldiering in India*, 1764–87 (London, 1928), p 79.
18. Macpherson, *Soldiering in India*, 176, 87:81.
19. Farooque, *Roads and Communications in Mughal India*, p 12.
20. Sonargaon is situated in Bangladesh. It was the ancient capital of Bengal, but now an insignificant village named as Painam, situated two miles from Brahmaputra.
21. Tabaqat-i-Akbari, vol. II, p.174.
22. Qanungo, Sher Shah and His Times, p.175.
23. Tarikh-i-Daudi, text. ed. S.A. Rashid (Aligarh), 1954, 118-19.
24. Jharkhand is associated with the hilly forest region from Rohtas to Birbhum. It is the geographical expression of an extensive and indefinite area. Blochman writes that in the Akbarnama, the area from Birbhum to Patanpur

in central India, and from Rohtasgarh to Garhi in the south is called 'Jharkhand', or 'jungle land'. There is no clear-cut topographical designation, and the term is generally used for the hilly and forest region of Chota Nagpur from Rohtas to Birbhum. S H Hodivala, Studies in Indo-Muslim History Bombay, 1959, 4534.