

## [Hindus on the Silk Road, Part II](#)

Category : [July 1989](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 1989

# Hindus on the Silk Road, Part II

For thirteen hundred years the Silk Road threaded together the empires of China, India, Greece, Rome and Persia, spectacular civilizations radically diverse, yet linked by the seduction of rich trade and territorial conquest. The great Road-actually a network of prehistoric routes branching into various nations-operated as a relay system. Tons of goods were transferred from caravan to caravan as traders plodded for months across rock, sand and snow, braving merciless sun, storms and roving bands of cutthroat robbers.

The precious cargos of silk and spice were picked up at the Western frontier of China where the Great Wall ended and the wasteland of the Tarkim Basin began. At the Wall fort of Jiayuguan, trains of snorting camels rolled in led by Persian, Jewish, Bactrian, Indian Buddhist or Hindu traders, a leathery gang who prayed daily to a panoply of Gods, were impeccably honest and skilled in survival.

The Silk Road split into north and south highways around the Tarkim desert connecting one oasis town to another and rejoining at the metropolis of Kashgar at the foot of the Pamir Mountain plateau north of Kashmir and Afghanistan. China, India and Persia crumpled together like earthen aluminum foil at this southwest corner of the Tarkim region in a small, strategic bit of territory called Khotan. Here the Silk Road uncoiled through rugged Kashmir into imperial India. Cosmopolitan Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Taoists and a host of other Sects mixed in the teeming business of Khotan. After an illumined existence, the Silk Road cities of Tarkim perished, victims of warfare, pillaging and desecration. They were abandoned. Desert sands buried them. History forgot them.

In the 1880's European explorers literally stumbled upon the molten-looking ruins and fragmented Buddhist icons of Khocho on the North Silk Road. A scrap of manuscript with Sanskrit on it was found in 1889 in the Kucha city site. It dated back to the 5th century CE making it one of the oldest specimens of written Sanskrit in Indian history. Walls of monasteries, stupas, meditation and temple

halls bored into mountain cliffs still held the pastel colors of religious frescoes executed in the life-like style of Greco-Indian. Painterly scenes of the Buddha, Hindu brahmins in irate debate with Buddhists, youthful Hindu ascetics with rudraksha beads, Bodhisattvas, Siva, Brahma and Vishnu, Chinese contemptatives, and curious men with red hair and beard and blue eyes leapt off the cold walls of the Tarkim desert cities.

An illustrated manuscript of the Manichean sect (a Persian blend of Zoroastrianism and Gnostic Christianity) depicted on one side-in ornate Persian style-the deities Ganesha, 'Vishnu, Brahma and Siva. Another highly damaged fresco reveals a fine featured Hindu sage holding the vajradhata, the thunderbolt symbol of kundalini awakening. Thousands of Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts on Buddhist canon and Hindu sciences surfaced. Sanskrit was among the spoken languages of the cities' upper dass.

It was a stupefyingly rich discovery-the migration of both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism across Central Asia into China and Persia, and in its wake Hindu traders, craftsmen, scholars and masters washed up in alien lands. This Mars-like landscape, radiating an indefinable mystic aura much like the American Southwest desert and mountain ranges, bubbled with spiritual knowledge. Here a man of yoga! and asceticism could live unmolested in a high cliff cave overlooking a bristling green valley oasis. A scholar could tend his manuscripts, marvelously preserved in the dry climate, and enjoy the privilege of discussion with fellow academics from dozens of sects-all in a setting of enviable opulence and the sparkling clime of the water-giving mountains.

Kucha was such a city and Kumarajiva such an urbane scholar. Kucha was on the Tarim's Northern route, on its eastern portion, closer to the edge of Chinese influence. In the 4th century CE Kucha was reaching its zenith as an independent city state. Kumarajiva was a Hindu brahmin, born in Kucha of brahmin parents from India. Growing up in Kucha, Kumarajiva was a human sponge for doctrine and language, learning not only Sanskrit, Indian and Persian dialects, but later Chinese also.

But Kucha couldn't offer a classical Brahmin education. So Kumarajiva as a brahmachariya student rode the camel trains back through Kashgar down to Kothan and followed the Silk Road into Kashmir. Apprenticing himself in a Vedic school, he acquired mastery over the Vedas and related sciences of linguistics,

medicine, astrology and mathematics. He returned to Kucha and earned a reputation across the Silk Road cities as an encyclopedia of Hindu learning. In a process typical of those times, he wrestled philosophically with the Buddhists and eventually converted to a Mahayana sect.

In 383, the Chinese emperor ordered a general to bring Kucha back under Chinese suzerainty. In the ensuing struggle, Kumarajiva was taken captive by the general. The two bonded as friends and returned to China where Kumarajiva earned glowing fame as a translator of Sanskrit works into Chinese. It is also reasonable to suppose that while in China he was approached by Taoist contemplatives in regard to Hindu tantra knowledge he had access to in Kashmir. A century after Kumarajiva went to China, a manual of the Hindu Samkhya philosophy was translated into Chinese.

Kashmir was not the only entryway of the Silk Road into India. To the west of Kashmir lay the Kushan empire blanketing central Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush mountains including the Kyber Pass. The Kushan nation subjugated and settled the far northwestern Hindu territories. Their capital, inherited from previous Hindu rulers, was at Peshawar at the fertile mouth of the Kyber Pass, the second portal of the Silk Road into India. As Chinese Buddhist pilgrims reported, Hindu sects were flourishing in towns all along the Afghan portion of the Silk Road. In the 3rd century CE, the emperor of Kushan converted to Buddhism, swayed by the brilliance of Aswaghosh, another Hindu scholar of great repute who had also given his faith to Buddhism. This imperial Kushan conversion and the herculean efforts of Aswaghosh to reconcile Hinduism and Buddhism into a single faith-Mahayana, "Greater Vehicle," Buddhism-began a centuries-long migration of Mahayana schools across the Tarkim Basin into China. The Mahayana sects absorbed the Hindu pantheon and the concept of female-personified shakti. Eventually, a few commandeered the more esoteric tantra mysticism of Saivite masters. As China extended its culture more concretely into Tarkim, there was a vigorous commingling of Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist yogic, dietary, al-chemical and bodily sciences. China became so strongly associated with powerful, occult arts that northern Hindu yogis in the mediaeval ages would for some time be known as Chinachariyas, "masters of China-land."

In 1900 British archaeologist Aurel Stein outfitted an expedition in Srinigar, Kashmir, crossed over the Karakorum Pass into Khotan to begin excavating, According to ancient Tibetan chronicles, Khotan wasn't Buddhist in origin. It was a major Hindu outpost of Kashmir, a trading town that spilled over from the Silk Road across Kashmir's Karakorum Mountains. But long before goods and Kashmir gold flowed over this highway, the same route guided Hindu monks who dealt in,

samadhi, cosmic energy philosophy, kundalini prowess, the metal mercury and biological longevity. Across the Tarkim Basin, in imperial China, the Taoists sought precisely the same wisdom and goals.

In the history of religion, there are no parallel mystic pursuits as markedly in lockstep as that of the Hindu tantrics and the Taoist sages. Without question, the two systems exchanged knowledge and technique-this occult trade occurring far back into the centuries BCE, even before commercial trade crept along the Silk Roads. Even 1,000 years later in the 5th and 6th centuries CE, two Hindu kings became enchanted with the Tao-te-ching, the oldest known exposition on the Tao. Song Yun, a wandering Taoist monk, lectured on the Tao-te-ching to the raja of Udyana. And Li Yi Piao, a Chinese nobleman (the aristocracy often pursued Taoist knowledge) visiting the court of King Bhaskara so interested him in the Tao-te-ching that the raja ordered it translated into Sanskrit.

Of the earlier times when Hindu and Taoist seekers sat in concourse on mankind's deepest secrets, their long hair loosed to the winds, there is legend and hints, but little scholastic fact. Four thousand years ago, in a huge tract of northwestern India, the sophisticated Indus Valley civilization thrived. It was Saivite by faith, with very advanced urban, technological and agricultural capacities. Among the human remains found in the great cities are Chinese. And it is within the Saivite Indus Valley empire that clear testimony of yoga practices and asceticism first appears. In all probability, the ancient pre-Taoist Chinese acquired contemplative disciplines and a concept of an indefinable Absolute Reality from this hoary Hindu empire. Jumping seventeen centuries later, the Mahabharata mentions Chinese mendicants.

The legends are magnetic and mysterious, revealing much. As Stein's archeological expedition trekked over Kashmir, he was following in the footsteps of Saivite siddhas and nathas (lords of yoga) and Shakta yogis who roamed at will the high alpine and glaciated zones of Kashmir for the past 4,000 years, if not millennia longer. The rugged pathway of the Kashmir Silk Road cut across the cradle of the Hindu tantric schools. Indeed, the most sacred temple/sadhana sites of the Hindu tantric yogis lay across the Himalayas, the Kashmir Karakorum mountains and the Hindu Kush. In these mountain series, simultaneous to the chronicling of the Aranyakas and Upanishads of the Vedas, the tantric sciences were being explored, perfected and recorded in the scriptural class known as Saiva Agamas, later replicated into the Shakta Tantras. Indeed, even the Upanishads contain streamers of tantric knowledge: pranayama, kundalini, nadi psychic nerve channels, hatha yoga, As a crossover between Vedic and tantric lore, the Shakta

Tantras record a legend of Sage Vashista journeying to China to gain initiation into a sect known as Mahachinatara, dedicated to unlocking the secret shakti power of Tara, a Goddess of Hindu origin.

A tantalizing hint surfaces often in tantric lore: the legendary city of Siddhapuri. It was an earthly metropolis of the most accomplished yogis, perfectly in oneness with Siva and masters of astounding supernatural powers. Siddhapuri was said to exist in the northern regions beyond India, making the Tarkim Basin a possible locale, but it could also lie further north in the Russian steppelands. It has never been found. As a fascinating corollary to this legend, there is the fable of Lao Tzu, the Taoist patriarch who recorded the Tao-te-ching. It is said that Lao Tzu, the archivist of the imperial library, became disenchanted with the intrigue and warfare that ravaged China in the 6th century BCE. He abandoned his position and journeyed westward to the edge of the Chinese nation, to a final outpost on the Gobi desert, which leads into the Tarkim Basin. He informed the sentryman that he was going to the abode of the Taoist immortals in the far West. The guard entreated Lao Tzu to at least give of his wisdom before he left, and thus the Tao-te-ching was recorded. Lao Tzu rode off into the arid wastelands navigating towards the fastnesses of the immortal Taoist sages. Between the Hindu tantric legend and the Taoist fable, the two locations cross either at or above the Tarkim Basin.

Finally, there is the documented chronicle of Bhogar, a Taoist master of alchemy from China who joined the Saivite lineage known as the Nathas. The Saiva Nathas were instrumental in the formulation and custodianship of the Agama/tantra scripture. They circulated through the high frontiers of Kashmir, but also dispatched missions to distant lands. One such mission was that of Sundaranatha, a Kashmir nathha who in the 2nd century BCE journeyed to the Tamil lands of India's deep south. There he wrote a 3,000-verse compendium of the Agamic wisdom-known as the Tirumantiram- and established 7 sub-orders of his Natha school. It was here in the south that Bhogar converted to the Nathas and eventually headed one of Sundaranatha's 7 sub-orders. It is said that he came to India via the Silk Road after visiting Arabia. He maintained contacts with China and a band of his Natha disciples traveled there-probably by ship-for training. The creation of the Muruga image at Palani Hills temple in South India is attributed to Bhogar. It is crafted from a mix of 9 poisonous metals and herbs, a feat that cannot now be duplicated. Men have died trying.

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