

BABURID (MUGHAL) CONTROL OF THE KHYBER PASS IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract: The Khyber Pass played a key role throughout history for the transit of Turkestan and India. This pass mostly remained under the control of the rulers of Kabulistan and the local tribes in the historical course; and attempts made from the Indian side to gain control met with great difficulties. The pass had spent the whole sixteenth century under Baburid (Mughal) rule, albeit it appears that it had become an area of conflict between the central government and the autonomous administration on the other side of it. Despite them having great armies, rich treasures and achieving spectacular success in India, the Baburid emperors had to constantly struggle with other members of the dynasty and their supporters located in Kabul. In these power struggles, Khyber became the main natural barrier separating the two factions. The struggle for dominance over the pass from Babur Shah to the reign of Akbar Shah is also a harbinger of developments such as the Anglo-Afghan Wars that took place in the following centuries. In this study, the struggles for domination on the route in question, the measures taken by the rulers of India against the attacks that could come through it, and the commercial role of the road in the said period are discussed and an assessment is presented in this context.

Keywords: Khyber, Afghan, Akbar Shah, Baburid (Mughal), Route

ON ALTINCI YÜZYILDA HAYBER GEÇİDİ'NDE BABÜRLÜ KONTROLÜ

Öz: Hayber Geçidi tarih boyunca Türkistan ve Hindistan ulaşımı için kilit bir rol oynamıştır. Bu geçit tarihi süreçte çoğunlukla Kabulistan hükümdarları ve yerel kabileler tarafından kontrol edilmiş; kontrolü ele geçirmek için Hindistan yönünden yapılan girişimler büyük güçlükler arz etmiştir. Geçit, bütün on altıncı yüzyılı Babürlü hakimiyetinde geçirmiş olmasına rağmen görülmektedir ki merkezi yönetim ile öteki taraftaki otonom yönetim arasında bir çatışma alanı hâline gelmiştir. Hindistan'da büyük ordulara ve zengin hazinelere sahip olmalarına ve göz alıcı başarılar elde etmelerine rağmen Babürlü padişahları Kabil'de konumlanan diğer hanedan mensupları

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ve onların destekçileri ile devamlı mücadele etmek durumunda kaldılar. Söz konusu iktidar kavgalarında Hayber iki fraksiyonu birbirinden ayıran esas doğal engel oldu. Babur Şah'tan Ekber Şah dönemine kadar geçit üzerinde süren hakimiyet mücadelesi sonraki yüzyıllarda gerçekleşen İngiliz-Afgan Savaşları gibi gelişmelerin de habercisi durumundadır. Bu çalışmada söz konusu güzergâh üzerinde gerçekleşen hakimiyet mücadelelerine, Hindistan hükümdarlarının bu vasıta ile gelebilecek saldırılara karşı aldıkları tedbirlere ve yolun söz konusu dönemde oynadığı ticari role değinilmekte ve bu bağlamda bir değerlendirme sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hayber, Afgan, Ekber Şah, Babürlü, Yol

INTRODUCTION

India is a vast landscape with mountain ranges along the northwest, north, and northeast, and surrounded by seas from other directions. Mountains, valleys and forests in various parts of the country have allowed many different languages, beliefs and ethnicities to survive until today. However, in contrast to what this picture may inspire, it would not be true to say that India has historically been isolated from the rest of the world. In the light of many sources from the antiquity and up to the 17th century, it is known that the South Indian coasts were at the center of a expansive commercial network stretching from China to Arabia, from Egypt to Zanzibar.

North Indian lands also participated in this trade through the ports of Gujarat, Bengal and Sind. In addition to this, North India was an important provider of the Silk Road, another very busy commercial channel between Eurasia and Africa. In this land trade, India's main routes passed through the territory of present-day Afghanistan. So much so that, in the 15th century, Clavijo referred to the Kabul region, as "Little India"; Bâbur Shah, on the other hand, described the same region as India's main market a century after Clavijo.¹

¹ Ruy González de Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane (1403-1406)*, trans. Guy le Strange, Routledge, London, 1928, p. 204; Gazi Zahîreddin Muhammed Bâbur Şah, *Baburnâme (Vekayi)*, trans. Reşit Rahmeti Arat, ed. Çetin Şan, İstanbul, Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2006, p. 286.

Undoubtedly, the most important factor in the formation of this definition was the limited availability of highways between the countries of the region. The routes passing through the Hindu Kush Range, which separates Turkestan and Afghanistan, led from Kabul to Belh with very few passages; meanwhile the route passing through the Kabul, Ghazni and Kandahar line stretched around the Gur region and reached Herat, doing so, connecting India to the Silk Road. However, there was a similar distinction between the Kabul region and India. The Sulaiman Mountains, starting from the Bedahshan region and extending into Balochistan, limited the transportation and communication between the east and west, as they gave few passages. In the north of this range, the road, which passes through the Khyber Mountains rising between Jalalabad and Peshawar, and has a length of approximately 48 km, has been the most important crossing point between the Indian Subcontinent and the west-northwest countries throughout history. The Pass known as the Khyber Pass since at least the sixteenth century², due to this mountain range it passes through, was a conjunction where two world met. For this reason, it was as critical as the Turkish Straits in the course of history. Khyber remained under the control of the Baburid (Mughal) State for about two centuries. However, it is seen that the Khyber Pass was a field of competition that changed hands between the central government, that is, the Baburid Emperor and his appointees, and the administration in Kabul. Due to this emergent strategic role, some glimpses of its other particularities can be found in the Baburid sources. Based on this observation, it can be attempted to define Khyber's military, political and economic aspects and importance in the 16th century, the period in which a new North Indian empire was in the process of formation.

When Babur Shah (p. 1504-1530) captured the city of Kabul and established his own state in 1504, he launched an expedition to explore his surroundings and subjugate the tribes in the region to himself³. As he tells in his memoirs, Babur discovered the Khyber Pass during this operation and went as far as the Indus⁴. While talking about the fighting around Khyber during another punitive campaign in 1519, it is revealed that he used the Khyber road in this first comprehensive Indian campaign⁵. The fact that the emperor set up a tent

² Ferhat Çiftçi, "Hayber Geçidi'nin Tarihi Coğrafyası Üzerine Bazı Notlar", *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları*, vol. CXXVI, p. 137; *Baburnâme*, p. 289.

³ *Baburnâme*, p. 308-10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310, 455-57.

while he was staying in Ali-Masjit during the 1525 campaign shows that there was no fortification in the passage at this date⁶.

After his conquest of India, Babur Shah described the postal route he established between Delhi and Kabul to strengthen his contact with Kabulistan:

“On Thursday the 4th of the latter Rabi’, it was settled that Chiqmaq Beg with Shâhî tamghâchî’s clerkship, should measure the road between Âgra and Kâbul. At every 9th kuroh (cir 18m.), a tower was to be erected 12 qârîs high and having a châr-dara on the top ; at every 18th kuroh (cir. 36m.), 6 post-horses were to be kept fastened ; and arrangement was to be made for the payment of the post-masters and grooms, and for horse-corn. The Order was ‘If the place where the horses are fastened up, be near a crown-domain, let those there provide for the matters mentioned ; if not, let the cost be charged on the beg whose pargana the post-house may be.’”

It is quite possible that the postal network that Bâbur Shah established passed through this way, due to the fact that he used Khyber in most of his campaigns. Considering the statements of Francisco Pelsaert about a century later, a tower should have been established in the passage between 4 or 9 kos⁸. It has also been noted that traces of some of these towers were seen in the region until recent times⁹. In addition to these, when Bâbur Shah appointed his sons to various places, he specifically states that Kabul and its surroundings were kept under his own divan, with the purpose of retaining the control of the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 580; Zahiru’-d-din Muhammad Bâbur Pâdshâh Ghâzî, *The Bâbur-nâma in English (Memoirs of Bâbur)*, trans. A. S. Beveridge, London, 1922, vol. II, p. 629-30.

⁸ “The King’s letters or farmans to the chief lords or princes are transmitted with incredible speed, because royal runners are posted in the villages 4 or 5 kos apart, taking their turns of duty throughout the day and the night, and they take over a letter immediately on its arrival, run with it to the next village in a breath, and hand it over to another messenger. So the letter goes steadily on, and will travel 80 kos between night and day”, F. Pelsaert, *Jahangir’s India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, trans. W. H. Moreland - P. Geyl, Cambridge, 1925, p. 58. This distance, which is known as "kos", "kuruh" or "korûr", is thought to be 17.7 km during the reign of Akbar Shah. For a comprehensive study see: Irfan Habib, “Postal Communications in Mughal India”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. XLVI, p. 236-52; Habib, *Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, New Delhi, 1984.

⁹ Bearden, Milton. "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires." *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6 2001, p. 1-2.

Kabul-Delhi line, which is also an act that can be seen as the indicator of his awareness of the importance of this route¹⁰. Based on these, it is possible to think that Khyber remained under the central control as long as Babur Shah was alive.

Upon the death of Babur Shah, it is seen that the control of the route passed to his son, Kamran Mirza, who inherited or usurped the throne of Kabul. Despite the fact that his elder brother Humayun Shah (p. 1530-1556) became the emperor in India, this mirza managed to add the lands of Punjab and Kabul-Kandahar to his share and was in constant struggle with his elder brother¹¹. When Humayun Shah retreated to Punjab after losing his capitals due to the defeats he received from Shîr Shah Sûrî (p. 1540-1545) between 1538-40, he wanted to return to Kabul, but Kamran Mirza did not allow it¹². Shîr Shah, following the withdrawing Baburid forces, did not find anyone standing in his way and thus easily captured the Punjab region. He then built the Rohtas (Rhotas) Fortress in order to prevent the possible attacks of the Baburids who had mainly retreated to Kabul and Kashmir. With this fortress he was cutting the route used by Babur Shah in his last India campaign which coincided with the ancient Scythian road¹³. This castle with a large courtyard, which seems to have been built to house many portable structures, appears to be a provincial garrison rather than a defensive point¹⁴. This rises the idea that Rohtas was intended to be used not only for the protection of Punjab and the Delhi road, but also for the invasion and administration of the neighboring provinces.

When Humayun Shah finally reclaimed the throne of Delhi, 15 years after his expulsion from India, control of the region shifted from the Suri Dynasty, once again into Baburid hands, and this did not change until the invasion of Punjab by the Afsharids in the eighteenth century.

¹⁰ *Baburnâme*, p. 578. However, when the planned Turkistan expedition was unsuccessful, this place remained in Kamran Mirza.

¹¹ John F. Richards, *The New Cambridge History of India I.5: The Mughal Empire*, ed. Gordon Johnson - C. A. Bayly - John F. Richards, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 9-11.

¹² Gülbeden Begüm, *Hümayunnâme*, trans. Abdürrab Yelgar, TTK Yayınları, Ankara, 1987, p. 168-69. Mirza Muhammad Haidar Duğlat, *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia: The Tarikh-i Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlât*, trans. E. Denison Ross, Curzon Press, 3. bsk. London & Dublin & New York, 1972, p. 478.

¹³ ‘Abbas Khan, “Târikh-i Sher Shâhî”, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, trans. Sir. H. M. Elliot, London, 1872, vol. IV, p. 390; Burhan İzgin, *Babürler Devleti’nde Askerî Teşkilat (1526-1605)*, Istanbul University Institute of Social Sciences Master's Thesis (retrieved 2021, <https://tez.vok.gov.tr>), p. 98.

¹⁴ İzgin, *loc. cit.*

After Humayun Shah's death, the Baburid domains were divided between his two sons by powerful emirs. Among them, Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (p. 1556-1605) took the lands of India and the position of emperor thanks to his atalik, or guardian-regent, Bayram Khan, while Muhammad Hakim Mirza was enthroned in Kabul, just like his uncle. According to Ebu'l-Fazl, the domains of Hakim Mirza's guardian-regent Mun'im Khan covered the regions of Kabul, Ghazni and the lands from "the Hindu Kush to Nilab (Indus)"¹⁵. It is understood from this record that the control of Khyber remained on the side of Kabul in this succession as well.

Hakim Mirza was used by Akbar Shah's opponents against him as a pretext and legitimizer of rebellion. Those who rebelled against the emperor mostly tried to have the khutbah delivered on behalf of his brother or claimed that they were acting on the mirzas behalf. As a matter of fact the mirza too, who did not give up the imperial throne, organized raids on the Lahore (Penjab) Province. Among these the great assault in 1581 extended to as deep as Lahore, the center of the province, testing the defences built by Shîr Shâh and most likely overcoming it for upon this attack Akbar Shah himself came to the region and advanced as far as the mouth of Khyber. There appears to have been no clashes because Hakim Mirza retreated due to the emperors arrival. Akbar Shah, apparently with the goal of preventing these plunders and finding Shîr Shah's defences to be too deep in the imperial domains, had the Attok (Attock / Atak) Fortress built, 82 km from Peshawar, at the Indian exit of Khyber, thus following and taking further the footsteps of Shir Shah¹⁶. Regarding this, Ebu'l-Fazl uses the following expressions:

"There was a noble barrier placed between Hindustan and Kabulistan, and it was made the material for enforcing the obedience of the turbulent of that border. The helpless obtained a means of subsistence, the seekers of traffic obtained confidence, and world-traversers had security."

Located 142 km northwest of Rohtas Fortress, this new fortress shows that Akbar Shah expanded the area he controlled to the mouth of Khyber, which had traditionally been the Indus line so far. When Hakim Mirza died in 1585, Akbar Shah sent two armies to the frontiers of Bangal and Gujarat, and immediately set out from Agra for Lahore to prevent the region from falling to the

¹⁵ Abû'l-Fazl 'Allâmî, *The Akbarnama*, trans. H. Beveridge, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1907, vol. II, p. 25

¹⁶ Khwâjah Nizâmuddîn Ahmad, *The Tabaqât-i-Akbarî*, ed. Chandan Roychaudhuri, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1996 (1st printed 1936), vol. II, p. 548.

hands of Uzbeks or Safavids. After stationing himself in Attok, the emperor sent two armies to the directions of Kashmir and Kabul. The Kabul region had been going through hard times due to the disobedience of some Afghan tribes, especially the Roshaniya Afghans, who had revolted in line with the millennial (mahdaviyya) movements, and the pressures of Uzbeks towards Bedahshan. Seeing the weakness in the regional administration caused by the local dependant-emirs and court of the mirza, Akbar sent some of his most experienced generals under the command of Zaim Khan Kōke to the region¹⁷. However, when these commanders could not agree on joint action, the forces under the command of Raja Bir Bal, who had a very successful career under the emperor, were attacked and destroyed together with him¹⁸. The main operation forces returned to Attok, defeated by similar attacks. Sources did not hide the extent of the failure in the face of this situation and recorded that the emperor, after appeasing the defeated emirs, sent a new army under the command of his vizier, Todar Mal, and finally the region was taken under control with the efforts of this experienced statesman¹⁹. Despite this, the safety of the Khyber Pass was still not ensured. This situation lasted until the Baburid forces under the command of Kunar Man Singh defeated the Roshaniya Afghans at Khyber. With this victory, control of the pass finally fell into the hands of Akbar Shah. Kunar Man Singh remained stationed at the pass in the duration of the campaign. Taking the control of the main route between Kabul and Punjab in this way, Akbar Shah made some arrangements there and ensured the improvement of its infrastructure²⁰.

With Kabul bound to the central authority for certain and local tribes subdued, the need for a barrier between India and Kabul disappeared and the commercial potential of The Khyber Pass came to the fore. The recurring narratives in historical sources about the Kabul region exporting quality fruits to India while importing cotton products point to the important and continuing role played by the region in trade with Turkestan²¹. In recent studies, attention has also been drawn that the role of the northern routes, which includes Khyber, were of great importance in bringing good breed healthy horses,

¹⁷ *Tabaqat*, vol. II, p. 609.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 608-9.

¹⁹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁰ "Khaibar, this was formerly somewhat difficult, but by the command of His Majesty it has been made easily practicable for wheeled conveyance, and at the present time travellers from Turan and India take this route.", *The Ā'in-i Akbarī*, trans. Heinrich Blochmann, ed. D. C. Phillott, 3 vol., 2nd print., Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1979, vol. II, p. 406.

²¹ *Baburnāme*, p. 286; *Remonstrantie*, p. 30-31.

which Indian rulers were dependent on²². As understood from these researches, throughout history, India had had to import horses from neighboring countries, mainly from the west, in order to bring its horse stock to the quality it needed. According to Abu'l-Fazl, horses were constantly being brought from Iraq-ı Arab (Iraq) and Ajam (South Azerbaijan), Rûm (Ottoman provinces), Turkestan, Bedahshan, Shirvan, Kyrgyz (likely the steppe south of the Balkash, Almaty), Tibet, Kashmir and other countries²³. In this context, the Kabul-Lahore line appears to have been of great importance for the renewal of the Baburid stables. Especially Kabul, as one of the main routes for the refreshment of Turki horses for unlike Persian and Arabian breeds which were rarer and more expensive to acquire, the Turki breed was the high quality breed of horses in general use. Based on these dynamics existing throughout the sixteenth century, it is not surprising to see that horses are counted as the main commercial commodity of this province in the notes of Manucci in the late seventeenth century²⁴.

For the Baburids, who made the largest military expenditures for the cavalry class, the supply of horses and the quality of these horses were one of the most important issues of the state throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries²⁵. Based on the calculations of S. Moosvi and the sources, J. Gommans argues that the total trade volume of horse imports on the Kabul-India route amounted to 3,000,000 rupees²⁶. In this respect, Attock's tax revenues, again based on S. Moosvi's calculations, being at a level that can compete with important administrative and economic centers such as Delhi and Surat, may have been related to the horse trade in question²⁷. Finally, considering its advantages in horse breeding and trade, it is better understood why Punjab and especially Lahore came to the fore as a socio-political and economic center before Multan and Delhi provinces did for early Turko-Islamic states in the region using equestrian warfare methods.

²² See: Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002; Gommans, "The Horse Trade in Eighteenth-Century South Asia", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. XXXVII, 1994, p. 228-50; Kumari, Deepti. "Horse Trade: An Important Aspect of the Mughal Period" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. LXXVIII, 2017, p. 351-60.

²³ *Âîn-i Akbarî*, vol. II, p. 406.

²⁴ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor: or Mogul India, 1653-1708*, trans. William Irvine, John Murray, London, 1907, vol. II, p. 426; *Baburnâme*, p. 286.

²⁵ İzgin, *ibid.*, p. 75-83.

²⁶ Gommans, *Warfare*, p. 116. Karş.: p. Moosvi calculated the State's annual income as 3.960.327.106 dām, proximately 99 million rupi; Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire vol. 1595 a Statistical Study*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987, p. 195.

²⁷ Moosvi, *ibid.*, p. 310.

CONCLUSION

The Khyber Pass has been one of the most important transit points used between Turkestan, Iran and India. Located between the cities of Jalalabad and Peshawar, this passage remained under the control of the Baburid State during the sixteenth century, but became a barrier between the central government and the Baburid mirzas ruling in Kabul. Due to the watery wall set by the Indus on the eastern side, this pass was mostly under the control of Kabul. However during the times of decline of authority, it was closed to passage by the Afghan tribes. In order to prevent the attacks that could come from the Khyber Pass, which served as a protective barrier to the rival rulers in Kabul, the India-based Shīr Shah Sūrī saw the Rohtas Fortress built. Following his example and improving it, Akbar Shah raised Attok. The main reason for building the Attok seems to be firstly the location of Rohtas being too deep into the Lahore-Delhi route, and second, Akbar's intent of annexing Kabulistan back into Hindustan. Taking its location between the mouth of Khyber and the Indus into account, this new fortress reflected the emperor's desire to control the pass directly, not defend from it. As seen later in his western campaigns, it was the first step of his consolidation of this entire region's provinces such as Sind, Kashmir and Kabulistan under Baburid rule. When compared to Shīr Shah's defensive policy, it becomes clear that to the Suri Emperor Indus was the natural western border of his empire while Akbar Shah kept the idea of the integrity of Babur's domains in regard. These two forts not only cut off the historical northern migration route, but also cemented the control of the Indian ruler in the Punjab-Lahore province. Though the control of the Pass fell to disobedient tribes and was closed for a time, Akbar Shah led a grand campaign to the western provinces and saw the Pass restored to the Baburid hands, at the cost of heavy manpower losses. He later had the road improved, easing the trade of horse, fruit, dyes and textile between India, Turkestan and Iran. Horse trade, which was carried out through various routes but especially via Khyber, was of vital importance for the Baburid State, which used equestrian war methods effectively and had to operate a very large logistics organization. From all these assessments it can be conducted that the Khyber Pass played 3 key roles for the region in the 16th century, military, political and economic. The military role it played began with Babur's first raids into India and ended with the annexation of Kabulistan by Akbar. Its political role was that it was the physical barrier along with Indus between two claimant factions for the Empire of Hindustan. The struggle between Kamran and Humayun, and Hakim and Akbar, was mainly caused by the secure location of the Kamran and Hakim in Kabul thanks to the Pass. This role later

shifted towards external politics, that is the defence and conquest of Kandahar and Balkh, the doorways of Iran and Turkestan respectively. Finally, the economic role of the Pass kept increasing from Babur to Akbar and reaching to its full potential with the construction of Attok, the end of political rivalries and military operations, and the improvement of its infrastructure. This momentum seems to have lasted at least as long as the reign of Emperor ‘Ālāmgīr when the sources such as Pelsaert, Bernier and Manucci are taken into account.

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