

‘Revisiting Indo-Chinese Relations- A Dialectic Of Empathy And Rivalry’

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Abstract-

Throughout the middle of the last century till date India and China are at war and later loggerheads with each other. Tensions are spiking up at the frontiers without any signs of rapprochement of any kind. From May 2020 Chinese and the Indian troops are engaged in melee, face offs and skirmishes along the Sino Indian border. However the two countries have a history of amity, cordiality and friendliness with exchange of ideas spreading over several centuries even before the initiation of the Christian era. This paper is an effort to revisit the entire period of understanding from the pre-Buddhist period which in turn helped in the enrichment of both the cultures simultaneously and an effort to look into the factors regarding when and actually why relations between the two states deteriorated and reached a stage as we see today.

Keywords- India, China, Buddhism, bilateral trade, conflict

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Throughout the middle of the last century till date India and China are at war and later loggerheads with each other. Tensions are spiking up at the frontiers without any signs of rapprochement of any kind. From May 2020 Chinese and the Indian troops are engaged in melee, face offs and skirmishes along the Sino Indian border. It all started with the Chinese objection to build Indian road in the Galwan river valley. This led to melee fighting and subsequent death of several Indian soldiers in June 2020. China’s foreign ministry even stated that the Galwan valley incident was caused due to India’s trespassing the LAC in order to encroach Chinese territory.(Nayanima Basu,24 September,2021.) The standoff which started in 2020 is still continuing although talks at bilateral levels are being carried on to resolve the crisis. It is unfortunate that the present situation might seem grim enough to have any scope for reconciliation. However the two countries have a history of amity, cordiality and friendliness with exchange of ideas spreading over several centuries even before the initiation of the Christian era. This paper is an effort to revisit the entire period of understanding from the pre-Buddhist period which in turn helped in the enrichment of both the cultures simultaneously and an effort to look into the factors regarding when and actually why relations between the two states deteriorated and reached a stage as we see today.

There are researches which show that that during the third and second milenia BCE, there existed in the Qinghai –Gansu region a number of pastoralist cultures like Machang, Majiayo, Xindian etc who produced pottery having similarities with potteries of western Asia and South eastern Europe. Victor H. Mair argues that the Qinghai-Gansu cultures were interacting with the Indo-Iranian ones. Mair further argues that after about 1800 BCE the relation strengthened with the Iranians who were again responsible for bringing the chariot and horse to the East Asian Heartland during the second half of the second millennium BCE especially during the Shang dynasty. (Mair, Victor 2004, p. 87)Mair notes that the most important part of initiation of relations of China with the Indo Europeans is the feature of birth from flanks which again is a ‘result of the movements of Iranian peoples to the north and northwest of EAH’(East Asian Heartlands) (Mair, Victor, 2004 p 87) And a recent archaeological discovery of a conch shell from the grave of a Neolithic culture in Qinghai dated 1000 BCE which suggests that its place of origin is the Indian Ocean area. Before the beginning of the first millennium CE there are plenty of evidences of Indian ideas being practised in China. As Mair writes that the yogic disciplines are reflected in the Taoist concepts. It is stated that the Yogic practices entered China around fifth centuries BCE.

Mair suggests further that even Chinese silk could have been transported to India by the end of the first millennium BCE. The term ‘cinapatta’ or Chinese silk even appears in Arthashastra which is dated to the fourth or early third century BCE. China sold silk textiles to India from the early period of Han dynasty i.e. 206 BCE till the period of Ming dynasty i.e. 1368-1644 BCE. (Dale, Jan 2009, p81). And it is quite likely that that India and the ‘Indianized states of Southeast Asia’ used to sell cotton cloth to China. The Chinese silk or cinapatta was imported in India during Maurya period or the parallel Han times in China. From the eight century CE. onwards

maritime trade grew in importance between India and China and trade grew in all kinds. Huen Tsang the Buddhist pilgrim visiting from China described Indian silk by the name of 'kauseya'. Large amount of Chinese silk was imported in India and was very much popular among the Indian elite. Several Sanskrit texts attest its use from the first century through to the seventh century CE. Again Indian cotton and cotton cloth first reached the province of Xinjiang. It was called pai-tieh derived from Sanskrit patta. As Dale writes that by the sixth century CE the city of Gaoch'ang used to produce pai-tieh. However until the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries cotton cloth did not develop as a major industry in China. Dale adds that the variety known as *Gossypium arboretum* which originated in East Bengal was the basis for the Chinese cotton industry. It is interesting to note that cotton was an expensive product in China and the Chinese monks who followed the vinaya texts had to wear cotton clothes. They found it too expensive for them. The T'ang era texts also speak of fine cotton from the states of Southeast Asia and Burma which were Indianised. Huen Tsang is said to have recorded giving fine silks to visiting guests in China and in turn coveted fine Indian cottons to be presented to him by the visiting Buddhist monks from India. (Dale, Jan 2009, p 85)

Besides cotton and Buddhist artefacts India exported several other commodities to China. From the first to third century CE India exported coral, pearl, and glass to China along with Incense. During the T'ang era China also imported Indian drugs and medical texts 'many of them also associated with flourishing Chinese Buddhist culture of the period'.(Dale, Jan 2009 p 85) A number of Indian scientists reached China too especially the astronomers. Such eminent families were Kasyapa, Kumara etc.

Even during the Sultanate era evidences of Chinese trade with India are quite predominant. This suggests as Dale remarks, a kind of economic symmetry. The economic relations between the two civilizations was no doubt reinforced by the entry of Buddhism in China from India. Buddhism made quite an impact in China. It was around 65 AD during the Han dynasty two Indian Buddhist monks visited China- Dharmaraksha and Kasyapa Matanga. For them the first Buddhist monastery was built for them named Bai ma si. (Bagchi, 2008, p7) These two monks spent their lives in China spreading Buddhism.

Prabodh Chandra Bagchi is of opinion that the main overland route since the Han period passed through Central Asia. This region was called 'Ser-India' or the 'Innermost Heart of Asia'. (Bagchi,2008,p 9) It was during the Kushana period Buddhism spread to this area. The route reached Bamiyan before crossing Hindukush. Bamiyan is mentioned in Chinese records as Fan-yen-na. This place grew to be an important centre for Buddhist culture. Another important route for reaching China was via Kashgar known as Jiesha in Chinese. From Kashgar two different route could be taken to reach China. In the southern route Khotan was most important. Known as Yu-t'ien in Chinese, Khotan became one of the richest centres of Buddhist learning. Gomati-vihara was the most prominent Buddhist establishment in Khotan. Like Khotan Bharuka, modern Kuchar and Karasahr and Gaochang areas is said to have made distinctive contributions towards spreading of Indian culture to China. Especially Kuchar or Kuchi was a prominent centre for Buddhist studies and Buddhist teachers going to China took important role in spreading 'Buddhist lore' in China during the first few centuries of the common era. Kumarajiva from Kuchi went to China around 401CE and is stated to have started a 'new epoch in the transmission of Buddhism to China'.(Bagchi,2008,p 36)

Kashmir played a very important role in directly transmitting Buddhist traditions to China. The patronage of Kushana rulers led Buddhism to prosper in Kashmir. Among the foremost Kashmiri Buddhist scholars to go to China was Sanghabhuti. In 381CE. Other important Kashmiri scholars were Gautama sanghadeva, Punyatrata, Dharmayasas, Buddhayasas, Vimlaksksa, Buddhajiva. These scholars reached either Kuchi or Nanking. Buddhajiva was a 'collaborator' of Faxian who went to India and brought back several Indian manuscripts. Besides Kashmir a number of Indian scholars went to China from Central India. Among the most important ones were Dharmaksena who went to Kuchi, Gautami Prajnaruchi who came in around 516 CE, Gunabhadra who came around 435CE. The most noted scholar was Dharmagupta who visited China around the sixth century CE. Meanwhile the Tang dynasty came into power in China about 618CE. One of the most noted scholars to visit China during Tang period was Prabhakaramitra from Nalanda. It was during the Tang dynasty that Buddhism flourished in China to a great extent. Indian monks visiting China in great numbers continued till nearly 1036CE. (Bagchi, 2008, p 55-59)

Vice versa, a number of Chinese visitors entered India as early as first century BCE although as hostages of Kanishka. Territories were even allotted for them known as Cinabbukti near present Amritsar. In the third century CE attempts were made by the Chinese Buddhist monks to come to India with the principal purpose to learn Buddhism. One Chinese monk Zhu Shixing visited India around 260CE. By fourth century CE Chinese scholar Dao An took a keen interest in the Indian culture and Buddhism and awakened a new spirit of Buddhism in China. Influenced by the teachings of Dao An Faxian started his journey towards India. Faxian visited all the important places of pilgrimage in northern India. About 404CE Zhimeng started for India in 404CE He visited Kapilavastu, Pataliputra and made a collection of Buddhist texts. (Bagchi, 2008, p 67) Another Buddhist traveller Fayong started for India about 420CE and travelled almost all the important places in north India including Bengal. During the Sui dynasty a Buddhist mission was sent to India around 605 CE. When the Tang dynasty succeeded

the Sui in 618 CE there was a rise of the Chinese Buddhist monks visiting India. The most significant of the missionaries of the Tang period to visit India was Huen Tsang who visited India to study Buddhist literatures in greater depth. While staying in India Huen Tsang visited a number of kingdoms in northern and southern India and personally came in contact with a number of powerful rulers Harshavardhan of Kanauj and Bhaskarbarman of Kamrupa. He stayed for five years in Nalanda studying Buddhism. The last Buddhist pilgrim of the Tang period to visit India was Yijing who undertook the journey in 671CE. In the tenth and the eleventh centuries a number of Chinese monks visited China. However as P. Bagchi remarks that, 'the period of cultural collaboration between the two great countries had ended'. (P. Bagchi, 2008, p 81) This was primarily due to political troubles in China by the eleventh century when the overland routes to India were blocked. During the fourteenth fifteenth centuries Calicut was an important port which had a flourishing trade with China.

This was during the rule of the Ming dynasty about which descriptions are found in the chronicles of Ma Huan. However further maritime expeditions were forbidden by the Ming emperors which was continued during the following Qing dynasty. An interesting observation can be made here. It is stated that although 'the Qing harboured inherited notions of India as a land of Buddhism lying to the west, but could not reconcile this with reports about a Mughal empire then ruling in that geography'.(Shyam Saran, 8 October,2020) The Opium wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60 drained China financially and the Chinese psyche received a shock by the Indian troops serving under the British army filled the Chinese people with humiliation and indignation. Thus a deep negative perception of Indians emerged in the Chinese psyche. Chinese intellectuals like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were vehement in their criticism against India. Although Japan defeated China in 1894-95 interestingly Japan became the model to be emulated. India became the worst case scenario from the point of view of China and regarded as a country being enslaved. It was even argued that all Indian influences needed to be eliminated which was reiterated by noted Chinese intellectual Hu Shih in 1937.

However a silver lining was there that being the visit of Rabindranath Tagore to China in 1924 which is said to have 'rekindled a sense of affinity' between the populace of two countries. Unfortunately although as a poet and a Nobel Laureate he was lauded the left wing intellectuals like Lu Xun or Guo Moruo were critical of Tagore's vision of a spiritually superior Eastern civilization over the West. First provisional president of the Chinese republic Sun Yatsen although was not that disparaging of India but argued that the Britishers were a threat to China only because they could colonise India. When Chiang Kaishek's Kuomintang Party was defeated and the People's Republic of China was established India readily showed its support. In spite of this good gesture PRC leaders remained suspicious.

From the fifties of the last century Indo-Chinese relations moved from positive to negative phases.

Even during the positive phase in the 1950s India was considered to be a ploy of western imperialism. India's independence was not taken seriously. Suspensions intensified during the Tibetan crisis phase. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai even entertained observations like 'India coveted Tibet'. Relations between the two countries took a positive turn by the 1980s. Distinguished economist and the then President Ma Hong visited India on a positive note.

A very interesting phenomenon to note is that even there were political suspicions in the Chinese front, bilateral trade continued and flourished much in the 1960s. It is stated that 'trade has gradually come to occupy the centre stage of their interaction'.(Swaran Singh, 2005) This boom has been possible due to the initiatives on the parts of both the governments as well as both the business communities. The China-India trade is said to have remained China's most balanced trade. However fluctuations occurred when India made nuclear tests in 1998, although the impact on the bilateral trade relations is said to be limited.

In July 6 2006, Nathu La was opened thereby connecting both the countries. Across the pass raw silk, horses and tea are the items of trade. This symbolises a 'fresh camaraderie between the planet's fastest growing economies'.(Tarun Khanna, Dec.2007) Interestingly, although border tensions are continuing between the two countries bilateral trade with China has grown 44percent in 2021.(Explained:India's bilateral trade with China in 2021). It is being said that despite protracted rivalry between the two countries there are efforts to rebuild ties in 2021.

However although accommodative efforts are being noticed it is limited to the extent that neither China nor India are willing to compromise on their positions regarding the LAC(Line of Actual Control). Again even if both the states are trying to rebuild confidence what is coming in their way is the 'trust factor'. Thus 'Developmental Partnership' which was introduced in 2014 cannot be resumed especially after the Galwan Valley clash. (Jagannath Panda,January 8,2021)