



Historical and Cultural Dimensions of India's Relations with China

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Abstract

China and India are two of the world's oldest civilizations and have co-existed in peace most of the time for millennia. Contemporary relations began when India and China achieved independence in 1947 and 1949 respectively. India was one of the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) shortly after the latter was founded and on April 1, 1950 it became the first non-communist country to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing. Two states to share a deep relationship and subsequently explanations were sought to provide a reason for Sino-Indian cooperation. History was also occasionally dipped into to provide instances of ancient cultural ties. Both states had a history that could be traced to at least a three thousand years, and this was used to promote relations. The fact the China and India had been victims of colonialism also bound them together.

Key Words: India, China, Cultural, Historical, Relation

Introduction: India gained independence in 1947. China became a liberated and sovereign communist state in 1949. The time it seemed was ripe for the two states to share a deep relationship and subsequently explanations were sought to provide a reason for Sino-Indian cooperation. History was also occasionally dipped into to provide instances of ancient cultural ties. Both states had a history that could be traced to at least a three thousand years, and this was used to promote relations. The fact the China and India had been victims of colonialism also bound them together. It was also clear that both faced a challenging responsibility to build a strong economy.¹

During the 1950's the relations between India and China were flowery, based on the peaceful co-existence, but the Tibet issue, followed by a border dispute poisoned the climate of Sino-Indian entente cordiale. Nehru's policy of no-dispute and no-negotiation policies finally led to a border war in 1962. From then on, Sino-Indian relations entered an era of cold war which lasted nearly 20 years. However during the era of Rajiv Gandhi (1988), the tension between the two countries was minimized and initiatives were taken for improvement in the relations. Since the end of cold war the relations between the two countries has steadily improved, and also strengthened in various fields of mutual interest.²

India and China are the two giants of Asia of the oldest and living civilization of the world. The reliable literature records of Sino-Indian interface could be traced from Han Dynasty (BC 206- AD 220). The first information is provided by Si Maqian (BC 145-BC90), the great Chinese historian, in his masterpiece *Shiji Xinanyizhun*. It has been narrated that people in the Shu (another name of Sichuan province) were wearing clothes that were brought from Shendu (Sindhu from India). Therefore it could be established from the above fact that India and China were already having trade relations in Second Century BC. Later Ban Gu (32AD – 92 AD) writes about Kashmir (Jibin State) in his book *Qian Hanshu* (early Han Annals), and talks about state of affairs there, its weather and products like pearls, corals and lapis lazuli, etc. From the above mentioned facts it could be established that by 4th to 5th century AD there was already a sea route between India and China. As regard to the material; exchange, India supplied the trade items that were in demand in China and available only in India. According to literary sources, imported items transported from India to China included coral, pearls, glass and fragrances. On the other hand, silk appears to be the major item transported from China to India.³

Trade relations further developed during Tang (618-907), Song (960-1278) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasties. By this time maritime activities were intense and it is reported in various sources that in Guangzhou (Canton) there were ships of Indian, Persians and Sri Lankan merchants. Meanwhile, Indian astronomy, colander, medicine, music and dance, sugar manufacturing technology, etc., made their way to China. Chinese silk products remained popular among the trading items. Relying on the historical literature and archeological discoveries, it could be established that there was a continuous flow of cross-cultural currents between India and China.⁴

Besides material linkage, there was yet another linkage—the spiritual linkage, i.e., Buddhism. Though the roots of communication had already been established, this new linkage made them undertake many religious pilgrimages from India to China and China to India, besides opening many trade centers.

The anti-imperialistic efflorescence of the Indian and Chinese people manifested in a major way as a challenge to the colonial order for the first time during the First War of Indian Independence (1857-59) in India and the Taiping Uprising (1850-1864) in China. The reaction of Chinese and Indian people against their common enemy was the same. For the first time Indian soldiers were stationed in China and switched over to the Taipings and fought shoulder to shoulder against imperialists and Qing government. It was due to the synergy between the cultures of India and China that the nationalists and revolutionaries of India and China developed deep mutual contact that turned into friendship amidst their anti-imperialist struggle.⁵

Besides the nationalists like Borohan, Surendermohan Bose, Rash Behari Bose, M.N Roy, Barakatullah, Lala Lajpat Rai, and many others outstanding pioneers of Indian freedom movement maintained good contacts and friendship with Sun Yat-Sen who whole heartedly supported the Indian cause and rendered all possible help to them. The Chinese

media paid utmost attention and widely covered the Indian freedom struggle in various newspapers and journals.

A new chapter was written in the history of Sino-Indian relations during the war of Resistance and Second World War. So long as China suffered at the hands of Japanese, the reverberation affected India also. India dispatched a medical mission to China in 1938 to help them in their War of Resistance. Nehru made bonds of friendship even stronger when he visited China in 1939. The period from 1905-1947 was the period when both the people of India and China rendered support and sympathy to each other in their common struggle. It was Nehru's vision that in future India and China would necessarily come nearer to each other for the vast and tremendous potentials of economic cooperation in the New World after the war.⁶

Cultural Dimensions of India's Relations with China: India and China are naturally a pair of sister countries. Their similarities and their associations are great, numerous.⁷ Our two countries, both situated in the bright and glorious continent of Asia. India to the south-west and China to the north-east, spread out lordly in different direction but yet are linked up at the main line, just like the two wheels of the carriage or the two wings of a bird, and even better to say, like the two hands and feet or the two ears and eyes of a person.⁸

Both India and China are not mere societies; they are civilizations. We do not know exactly when and how they started exchanging their cultural elements, but what we do know is that they grew in parallel and shared their cultural traits since the beginning of human history and this tradition of sharing has been continuing ever since.

Historical Background of Cultural Exchanges: Even before the transmission of Buddhism, the Shang-Zhou civilization and the ancient Vedic civilization in 1500-1000 B.C. showed some evidence of conceptual and linguistic exchanges. For instance, "wumingzhi" (nameless finger) in Chinese is called "anamika" (nameless) in Sanskrit and in Pali. Similarly, some ancient Indian literatures mention "chinas" referring to the Chinese people. The Mahabharata of the fifth century B.C. contains reference to China. Chanakya of the Maurya dynasty (350-283 B.C.) refers to Chinese silk as "chinamsuka" (Chinese silk dress) and "chinapatta" (Chinese silk bundle) in his Arthashastra. Likewise, the Record of the Grand Historian of Zhang Qian and Sima Qian has references to "Shendu", may be referring to "Sindhu" in Sanskrit.⁹

In sixth century B.C., the birth of Confucius and Sakyamuni opened a new period of exchanges between the two civilizations. Emperor Ashoka's propagation of Buddhism after his conversion in 256 B.C. brought both civilizations even closer. Ashoka's bilingual (Kharoshti and Greek) edict points at extension of Buddhism in the direction of China and Central Asia. The trend continued in first century A.D. during emperor Kanishka's period. His empire, with its capital at Purushpura (now Peshawar in Pakistan), enabled Buddhist pilgrims and scholars to travel on the historic "silk route". Kashyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna made the White Horse monastery at Loyang their abode. Along the silk route,

Khotan Turpan and Kucha became prominent centers of Buddhism and India-China exchanges. The Chinese Pilgrim Fa Hein had left for India along the Silk Route and arrived there in 405 A.D. Batuo (464-495 A.D.) and Bodhidharma visited China; XuanZhang (604 A.D.) and I Ching were students at the prestigious Nalanda University.¹⁰ All along, the Silk Road played a significant role in facilitating India-China cultural, commercial and technological exchanges. It also connected both of us with the people of ancient Persia and the Mediterranean.

Both civilizations also shared scientific knowledge. In eighth century, Indian astronomer Aryabhata's astronomical signs were translated into Chinese in the book "Kaiyuan Zhanjing" compiled by Gautama Siddha, an astronomer in Chang'an of Indian descent. It is also believed that he translated the Nabagraha calendar into Chinese. During the Ming Dynasty, navigator General Zheng His arrival at Calicut in early 15th century is also a testimony of China's ancient maritime linkage with India.

Cultural Exchange in Modern Phase: Our exchanges continued during the days of our struggle for self-governance. In early 20th century, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited China twice, in 1924 and in 1929. Since 1911, Chinese scholars and intellectuals have been visiting and revisiting Tagore's life, works and philosophy.¹¹ During this year, which marks his 150th birth anniversary, there are efforts by Chinese publishing houses to bring out collected volumes of these writings on Tagore in the last one hundred years. Institutions are preparing to stage Tagore's plays in Chinese language for easy comprehension of Chinese audience. As part of Gurudev's 150th Birth Anniversary celebrations, Mission collaborated with Chinese institutions like Peking University, Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), Yunnan University and many others to hold seminars, exhibitions and movie screenings in his honour. A fully Chinese production of Gurudev's famous play- Chitrangna, is slated to be opened in Lanzhou University in March 2012.

Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis, whose mortal remains rest in the North China Martyrs' Memorial Cemetery in Hebei Province, sacrificed his life in the service of the Chinese people during the Sino-Japanese war. A part of the 1938 medical team of five Indian doctors, he stayed on in China working in mobile clinics to treat wounded soldiers. He was eventually appointed as Director of the Dr. Bethune International Peace Hospital built by the Eighth Route Army.

Cultural Exchange in the Cold War Period: Both India and China began their journey of independent governance almost at the same time, India in 1947 and the People's Republic of China in 1949. In 1955, the first Indian cultural delegation headed by then Deputy Minister of External Affairs Mr. A. K. Chanda visited China which was warmly received by the Chinese leaders and people during their tour. In the 1960s and 1970s Bollywood movies such as Do Bigha Zameen, Awara and Sree 420 of Raj Kapoor and Noorie struck an emotional chord in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. Even

today, people on the street hum the tunes of the songs of these films.¹² In 1986, a film delegation from India visited China and since 1988 both countries are bringing their people together through structured Cultural Exchange Programme.

Cultural Exchange in the Post-Cold War Period: In the last 30 years or so, both of us have made remarkable progress. We also face similar challenges. We are nations of youths, with hope, with dreams and with aspirations. Our leaders, realizing this, have carried forward the task of promoting people-to-people contacts sincerely, vigorously and diligently in the new millennium. Important projects have been completed. In 2003, Prime Minister Vajpayee had committed to build an Indian style Buddhist temple in Luoyang, Henan province and President Pratibha Devisingh Patil inaugurated the temple during her visit to China in May 2010. In February 2007, the Xuanzhang memorial hall has been inaugurated at Nalanda. In June 2008, joint stamps have been released, one stamp depicting the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya and the other depicting the White Horse temple at Luoyang. A centre for Indian studies has been set up in Peking University in 2003. Chairs of Indian studies have also been established in Shenzhen University, Jinan University and Fudan University. The 60th anniversary of the establishment of India-china diplomatic relations was celebrated with much fanfare in both countries in 2010.¹³

The broad contours of the India-China cultural cooperation was laid down in the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation signed in May 1988, which provides for an executive Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) for implementation. The latest CEP signed in Dec 2010 during the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India provides for cooperation in a gamut of cultural fields including exchanges of visits of performing artists, officials, writers, archivists and archaeologists, organizing cultural festivals, film festivals and exchanges in the field of mass media, youth affairs and sports.¹⁴

Leaders of both sides have announced 2011 as the "Year of Exchanges" and both countries have resolved to further strengthen cultural exchanges between our peoples. Youth exchanges have been encouraged. While young China expresses great desire to know Buddhism, Bollywood and Yoga, young India admires the Chinese economic miracle. A 500 member Indian youth delegation, led by the Hon'ble Minister of State for Sports and Youth Affairs, Sh. Ajay Maken, visited China in September 2011. A 20 member ICCR Bollywood Troupe toured China in September 2011. The Mission collaborated with the Beijing Film Academy to put up an alternative Film Festival titled "You Don't Belong" across several Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Kunming in November-December 2011. In order to connect better with the Chinese youth, the Mission has also opened an account at the popular micro blogging site, Sina Weibo, which has over 5000 followers. The Mission's Flagship Chinese language publication Jinri Yindu has a readership base of over 20,000 and is still going strong. Government of India is making efforts to popularize Chinese language at school level and is committed to build a modern international Nalanda University at Rajgir in Bihar with the help of partners and friends, for

which Government of China has expressed desire to contribute. The Nalanda University Governing Board held their annual meeting in Beijing in October 2011.¹⁵

The new Culture and Information Wing of the Mission began functioning from January 2011 from the New Chancery Premises. A Kathak dance teacher and a Hindustani classical music teacher joined the Mission on ICCR deputation in 2010, in order to expose the Chinese people to various facets of India's rich cultural tradition. This Wing conducts several events every month, including lectures, film/documentary shows, performances, book talks, etc dealing with Indian culture and heritage. Increasingly, a number of Indian artists have been performing on private visits or participating directly on invitations of esteemed institutions like the Central Conservatory of Music, NCPA and Beijing Dance Academy. The Wing also has an open library with around 3000 reference books on India.

During the visit of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and Premier Li Keqiang in 2013 the leaders designated 2014 as the Year of Friendly Exchanges between India and China. To mark this special year, Glimpses of India Festival was organized across several cities of China through 2014 showcasing Indian performing arts, exhibitions of modern Indian arts, depictions of Buddhism links between the two countries, food and film festivals. As part of the festival Kalashetra, Kathak Kendra Troupe, Sangeet Natak Akademi and a Bollywood Troupe from Indian Council for Cultural Relations visited China. Sangeet Natak Akademi performed at the Reception Marking the 60th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence at the Great Hall of People. Food Festivals were also organised in cities like Beijing, Qingdao, Shanghai, Hong Kong to give the local people a taste of authentic Indian cuisine. Yoga Festivals were organized in the month of July, 2014 in Beijing, Shanghai and Dali in partnership with Department of AYUSH, Government of India. Buddhist Art Exhibitions were organized in cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai and Chengdu. Indian Film Festivals were also organized in cities like Beijing, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Qingdao, Hong Kong and Xi'an in partnership with Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.¹⁶

During the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India in December 2010, the leaders of India and China agreed on a project involving compilation of an Encyclopedia of India China Cultural Contacts. The Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural Contacts was released in both English and Chinese versions during Hon'ble Vice President of India's visit to China on June 30, 2014 in Beijing. The Encyclopedia features over 700 entries, encapsulating the rich history of contacts and exchanges between the two countries in the trade, economic, literary, cultural and philosophical spheres.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a three day state visit to China from May 14th to 16th 2015. Prior to the visit, Prime Minister launched his own 'Weibo' handle to connect with the Chinese people. The details of the visit were first shared with the public via this Weibo handle, and the handle has since become immensely popular among Chinese netizens. The Prime Minister's visit was rich in symbolism, reflecting the growing closeness between India and China. For the first time, President Xi Jinping travelled outside Beijing to

receive a foreign leader in Xi'an, in his home province of Shaanxi. President Xi also accompanied Prime Minister to the Big Wild Goose Pagoda – itself a symbol of the shared legacy of our two great civilizations – and organized a grand welcome ceremony at the Xi'an city wall. Premier Li Keqiang joined Prime Minister at the Yoga-Taichi performance with the world heritage site of Temple of Heaven as the backdrop, the first ever such event, which highlighted the cultural connectivity between the two countries. The two leaders even clicked a 'selfie' which went viral with over 33 million hits on the Weibo. There were 24 agreements signed on the government-to-government side, 26 MoUs on the business-to-business side and two joint statements, including one on climate change. Expanding people-to-people exchanges and cultural contacts figured as a major theme of the visit. Prime Minister's visit to the Great Wild Goose Pagoda, joined by President Xi, and his attendance at the Yoga-Taichi event along with Premier Li exemplified the importance that our leaders attach to tapping the shared cultural heritage. Moreover, three new institutions: the Centre for Gandhian and Indian Studies in Shanghai, Yoga College in Kunming, and National Institute for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship in Ahmedabad were launched.¹⁷

On December 11, 2014, the 193 member UNGA approved by consensus with a record 177 co-sponsoring countries including China a resolution to establish 21st June as "International Day of Yoga". In its resolution, the UNGA recognized that Yoga provides a holistic approach to health and well-being and wider dissemination of information about the benefits of practicing Yoga for the health of the world population. Embassy of India Beijing and Consulates at Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong celebrated the First International Day of Yoga today on 21st June, 2015 in China. The event was celebrated in more than 14 cities of China including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Qingdao, Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Kunming, Xiamen, Wuxi, Hangzhou, Wenzhou and Changzhou in which thousands of people participated enthusiastically. Several Chinese celebrities including musician Ms. Siqin Gaoli, actors Mr. Wang Baoqiang, Mr. Du Yiheng, and snooker champion Mr. Ding Junhui gave personal video endorsement messages, congratulating on the occasion of International Day of Yoga and inviting people to participate in the event.¹⁸

Both India and China have vibrant cultures and vibrant people. Buddhism, Xuan Zhang, Tagore, Dr. Kotnis, Nalanda, Yoga and Cinema are only symbols of our long tradition of exchanges. They are testimonies of our shared heritage. The momentum has been set and the pace can only increase in the 21st century.

END NOTES:

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