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India and China: An appraisal of two unbroken civilisations

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(I) Background

India and China, the two giants are unique examples of unbroken 21st century civilisations. Both are situated in one of the glorious continent of the world, Asia, India to the south-west and China to the north-east. They are naturally a pair of sister countries with a hoary past. Both countries possess an extensive land with a multitudinous people, and have vibrant cultures and traditions with significant mutual influence in areas like art, philosophy, etc. They have stood up strong and tall from the very beginning to the present day. Although our countries have many times been trampled down and devastated by foreign invaders politically and economically, yet our superior traditions, teachings and customs have often assimilated the wild and barbarous. The prehistoric periods of both the countries has been long and full of events. We do not know exactly when and how they started exchanging their cultural elements; however, we do know that they grew in parallel and shared their cultural traits since the beginning of human history and this tradition has been continuing ever since. All along, the Silk Road played a significant role in facilitating India-China cultural, commercial and technological exchanges. It also connected both the countries with the ancient Persia and the Mediterranean.

The beginnings of Indian and Chinese civilizations seem somewhat similar. Although the records of ancient times in India are rather deficient, but according to references in Chinese sources on Buddhism, the condition of ancient India was quite similar to that of ancient China. Even before the transmission of Buddhism, the Shang-Zhou civilization and the ancient Vedic civilization showed some evidence of conceptual and linguistic exchanges. In the sixth century B.C., the birth of Confucius and Sakyamuni opened a new period of exchanges between these two civilisations.

The Indian theory of aesthetics is deeply rooted in the triple principle of *satyam* (truth), *shivam* (goodness/auspiciousness) and *sundaram* (beauty). *Satyam* (truth) is paired with *rtam* (the Cosmic Order) in the famous passage of *Rigveda* (X.90.1), which says both of these were born of kindled *tapas*. *Tapa* is the basic effort and form of the manifestation of existence, creation and bliss from the basic cause. This relates to the primary analysis of creation where Reality is seen in two forms. Viz. *Rtam*, the kinetic aspect of order and *satyam*, the potential aspect of truth. *Rtam* for Hindus is the blueprint for cosmic harmony (*Dharma*); for the Buddhists the law of righteousness (*Dhamma*); for the Muslims, it represents the inflexible yet all the merciful decrees of divine (*Haqq*), and for the Chinese, *rtam* is the mystical path

(*Tao*). Thus, *rtam* is a framework in which the process of creation, sustenance and dissolution operates. It regulates the cosmos into a systematic whole.

While looking into the underlying spirit of the national character of both the countries i.e. "Benevolent love" and "Polite deference" of China (which may be represented by the word "*Jet*" or perfect virtue) and "Mercy" and "Peace" of India (which may be represented by the word "*Ahimsa*"), while these four terms may be different in form, yet they are fundamentally the same in sense. The Chinese attitude towards Nature is a process of harmonization. Indians lay stress upon moderation so their attitude towards Nature is a process of assimilation. Both the Indians and Chinese believe in ancestor worship and have love for kinship.

(II) Interchange of Cultures

So far the historical records are concerned, the interchange of cultures between India and China has taken place for more than two thousand years back as is evident from the "*Buddhacharita*" or the classical biography of Lord Buddha. The early facts regarding the cultural relationship between the two countries are also found in various Chinese written sources like *Lieh-tsu*, *Thou-shu-wei-yi* (the *Book on Wonders of Chou*), *Lie-sien-chuan* (Biography of Fairies), *Shih-laoh-chih* (Sketches of Buddha), etc. For historical references about India, we still greatly depend on the travelogues of the Chinese travellers Hiuen Tsang, Fa Xian (Fa Hien), I-Tsing, etc. Both the countries became more intimate and prevalent after the royal recognition of Buddhism by Chinese Emperor Yung-Ping. Soon after the cultural entrepreneurs, students, teachers and traders from India and China visited centres of learning and pilgrimage in both the countries. The Buddhist cultural wave reached China in the second century BCE, if not earlier, but these exchanges became much frequent during later periods. Buddhism might have attracted Chinese people because Buddha himself was an agnostic and refused to discuss God and they still in considerable numbers revere him, as a great teacher. But the contrary argument can be that the Buddhism that attracted Chinese was the Mahayana Buddhism, who had envisioned Buddha perhaps as a theistic deity.

Along the silk route, Khotan, Turpan and Kucha became prominent centers of Buddhism and India-China exchanges. The first missionary who is known to have taken Buddhism to Central Asia was Vairochana, a Kashmiri Buddhist scholar. Vairochana is credited to have built the first monastery at Khotan and also introduced the Sarada alphabet in the region. Many scholars were reportedly migrated to Kucha during the 4th century A.D. which, subsequently, became one of the important seats of learning. The academic institution at Kucha was headed by a famous Buddhist teacher Kumārajīva, a Kashmiri by birth, who had his education in Ushkur in Kashmir. He is said to have first gone to Gilgit; from there he went to Central Asia. He is widely believed to be responsible for bringing in Mahayana and Madhyamika doctrine into Chinese philosophy. From the 4th to 6th century A.D. a number of Buddhist scholars went to China from Kashmir. Of these Kashmiri scholars, mention may be made of Sanghabuti, Gautama, Sanghadeva,

Buddhayasa. Buddhayasa stayed in Kashgar for a long span of time before leaving to China. He worked with Kumarajiva and after the death of the later, returned to Kashmir.

Another notable teacher of the 5th century A.D. who went to China via Ceylon and Java was Gunavarman. He was a prince but he refused to ascend the throne and became a recluse. He converted many people into Buddhist faith in Sumatra. In the 5th century A.D. when he reached China, he was received by the Chinese king and was offered to stay at a monastery called Jatavana Vihara. It was during the reign of Sron-btsan-Po (600-650 A.D.), sixteen students were deputed in Ladakh to learn the Kashmiri script which was to be used in Tibetan language. Two teachers, namely Tabuta and Gauta were invited to Tibet. It was during the same period that a statue of Buddha was installed at Lhasa. The migration of Kashmiri scholars continued in the 7th -8th century A.D. of these, mention may be made of Ananta, Santi, Garbha, Subhati and Somanatha. From China, Xuan Zhang (604 A.D.) and I Chang joined prestigious Nalanda University for learning.

It may be clearly spelt out here that in 650 A.D. when Lhasa was founded, the east-west grand trade route between Lhasa and Kashmir became more and more important. It also linked with the trade centres in between. The caravan route initiated from Srinagar through Zojila pass first reaches to Leh in Ladakh; from Ladakh, the route goes to Lhasa via the sacred lake area and Shigatse. It is presumed that the prototypes of the Kashmiri art were taken along with this route to Western Tibet. Padmasambhava came to Kashmir several times from Tibet and he came through Riwalsar. It was a difficult journey that involved three to four months time. It is said that he had taken away several Buddhist manuscripts and Kashmiri craftsmen with him for the benefit of Samye monastery. The routes, through which Padmasambhava moved, are not properly recorded. It was during the time of Saint Atisa that Richen-Zang-Po is known to have travelled through Kashmir in search of Kashmiri craftsmen and he must have followed the same route which was followed by the Buddhist pilgrims earlier. Both the countries were even having maritime linkage as is evidenced by the arrival of navigator General Zheng at Calicut in early fifteenth century.

India and China also shared their scientific knowledge as is evident from the fact that the works of a 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. He is believed to have translated the *Navagraha* calendar into Chinese. It is said that the words like *patas* (*pataka*), *barud* (gun powder), Mariner's compass (*qutabnama*) etc. came into Indian vocabulary from China via Persia or Arabic. According to Professor Ji Xianlin (who has translated Indian Sanskrit classics like Kalidas's *Shakuntulum*, and Valmiki's *Ramayana* into Chinese language), India did learn making crystalline sugar from China and earlier China had learnt raw sugar making process from India. It is believed that the selection process of Indian civil servants through competitive examinations has its roots in China, although through good offices of the British Empire. In the Chinese Han Dynasty (2nd Century BC - 2nd century AD) civil servants were selected through competitive examinations.

The modern phase of cultural exchange is remembered mainly because of two names i.e. Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis. Tagore visited China twice in 1924 and in 1929. Chinese scholars and intellectuals have been visiting and revisiting his life, works and philosophy before his visit to China since 1911.

(II.I) Rock Art and Archaeology

The archaeological studies and discovery of Palaeolithic tools from Potwar region in Pakistan, Tajikistan in Central Asia, Kashmir and Nubra valley indicates the cultural contacts between the lower Indus valley (in Pakistan), Kashmir and Central Asia in the prehistoric times. It is said that the archaeological research in respect of explorations and excavation has revealed similarities between Kashmir and various parts of Central Asia. The research in this field needs a thorough examination. The Buddhist rock reliefs and sculptures from Ladakh were basically influenced by the Indian Buddhist thought-currents. Archaeologically speaking, Kashmir had a highly developed Neolithic culture spread throughout the length and breadth of the valley. It seems that there is a succession of Stone Age industries going back to Palaeolithic times in Kashmir. The Neolithic cultures also show distinct signs of evolution, spatial differentiation and technological affinities with the preceding Stone Age cultures.

The investigations in high altitude Ladakh for last couple of decades have brought to light a large number of petroglyphs from different areas mostly confining to the ancient routes and passes connecting two valleys in Ladakh and also connecting Ladakh with surrounding areas particularly Central Asia. It is interesting to note that in Nubra valley the ancient route to Karakoram and further beyond to China lies on the left bank of river Nubra near village Sasoma. This evidence not only establishes the early human contact with neighbouring areas, but also establishes human movement within the valley.

The volume of the rock art in Ladakh region is enormous. Rock art of the area is spread in the elaborate mountain system of Karakoram and Himalaya. These two ranges determine the course of various valleys and river system of Ladakh in which small oasis-like villages and hamlets are spread. The importance of the rock engravings from Ladakh region lies in the fact that there are no historical records of the earliest immigrants or civilisation in Ladakh, except for various petroglyphs found from Zaskar, Kargil, Changthang, Nubra, etc. These depict an array of activities of their culture, day to day life, economic activities, customs and belief system.

Although rock art in India and China had separate developments with distinct art styles, forms and technical execution, yet they have common origin and closeness. The Chinese petroglyphs are mainly dated to the Neolithic period onwards, where as prehistoric rock art in India goes back to the Upper Palaeolithic. Early petroglyphs are associated with early agro-pastoral communities which are dated to 8000 BC. The Neolithic and Early Bronze Age art has been subdivided into three phases based on

narrative themes. As yet there is no direct cultural affiliation documented in the region, but the association is suggested by the dominant theme of petroglyphs.

Dazu has the glimpses of ancient cultural undercurrent between India and China. The rock art of western Indian Buddhist caves and the sculptural and painted art traditions of India inspired the rock art of China at many sites including the grottoes at 70 sites in Chongqing's Dazu County forming a large ritual site of Tantric or mystic Buddhism. Dazu grottoes and statues belong to mostly Tang (618-907 CE) and Song (960-1279 CE) dynastic periods with Taoist and Confucian influences and a strong Chinese personality having Indian subject matter and impact. The important places in Dazu are BEIshan (North Hill), Baodingshan (Precious Peak Hill) and Nanshan (South Hill).

The amazing grottoes and painted sculptures of Avalokitesvara, Amitabha, Manjusri, Kshitigarbha, Vairochana, Samantabhadra and thousand Buddha panels of Dazu and Ajanta, the Manushi Buddhas from Dazu and Ellora, the *Mahaparinirvana* scene of the Buddha from Dazu and western Indian caves and *Kalachakra* depiction of Dazu and of the monasteries of Ladakh and many such examples have close similarities in style and execution which are suggestive of a direct inspiration from Indian art. The exchange of ideas seems to have followed the southern branch of silk route through Xinjiang via Dunhuang and Lanzhou as well as via Chengdu to Dazu.

After giving an account of Buddhist linkages between India and China it would be appropriate to mention about the existence of Hindu temple(s) of 12th century AD in Quan Zhou in China's Fujian province and in Yunnan province, Southwest China, almost bordering India's North East. Finally, other religious connection between the two countries is the fact that St. Francis Xavier, Jesuit Priest, died in Macao (Aomen Gao) some 400 years ago and his remains are for public viewing in the famous Bom Jesu Cathedral in Goa, India.

(III) Conclusion

Both India and China have a rich heritage of shared tradition of exchanges in Buddhism, Xuan Zhang, Tagore, Kotnis, Naklanda, Yoga and cinema. But, there is much more to learn from Indian and Chinese contributions through mutual cultural relationships. At present we are so busy with our national concerns and strides to deal with mad tide of materialistic currents that we have no time to look after our old important and intimate relationship of past. Needless to say, we Indians and Chinese must wake up at once, and restore our old relationship. By interchanging our cultural resources we shall achieve a cultural renaissance and create a new world civilisation. The collaborative venture between India and China in the field of cultural studies can open new horizons and cooperation between the two nations. Comprehensive studies in this field will also help in opening up and revealing the antiquity of both the countries in time and space.

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