Indian Foreign Affairs Journal Vol. 13, No. 2, April–June 2018, 177-181

BOOK REVIEW

Tansen Sen, ***India, China, and the World: A Connected History***, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018), Pages: 540 + xviii, Price: Rs 995.00

Tansen Sen brings us an extraordinarily well researched and documented narrative of the interaction between the two great Asian civilisations from early times until today. The author has so deep a grounding in all Asian affairs that no bias is evident anywhere. The first two chapters encompass the circulation of knowledge and the routes, networks and objects used, and stays largely within Asia up to the 15th century. From then to the 20th century, external players, mainly European, play an incremental and imperial role all covered in the third chapter. The fourth chapter shows how increasing political awareness encouraged renewed connections, and Pan-Asianism found temporary favour with the new rising Asian elites. As colonialism is ousted and nation states are established, any post-colonial euphoria soon dissipated, and Asia also entered into an era of bitter territorial disputes exacerbated by cold war linkages. The current geopolitical disconnect between India and China surfaced very soon. Their inability to agree on a common border escalated into a brief war. A continuing confrontation lingers as both compete for a major role in Asia and in the world.

The Himalayas presented a massive barrier and, for centuries, no king or emperor from either side was interested in breaching it. When newly independent India established relations first with Kuomintang China and, a few years later, with the People's Republic, both sides were able to claim millennia of peace and friendship.

Considerable interaction did take place, with missionaries and traders taking the lead. Once Buddhism established itself in India, its followers were anxious to take it further. Fervent teachers fanned out in all directions. In the new abodes, some indigenous characteristics were assimilated from local societies. Religion even intruded into politics. Nevertheless, the desire to remain in touch with original sources in India continued. Notable Chinese travellers visited India for long periods. Their reports are remarkable for their detailed and extensive coverage. The most prominent were Zhang Qian (2nd century BC), Fa Xian, (4th century AD), and XuanZang (7th century AD). Indian monks

and scholars such as *Bodhi dharma* also taught in China and East Asia. Records of their work are limited probably because, unlike their Chinese colleagues, they saw no need to make or preserve them.

Alongside went traders who earned rich returns, exchanging local commodities despite formidable obstacles. The land routes were dubbed the Silk Route once China became a source of this prized commodity. Precious metals and gems, household goods, and foodstuffs and much more were on the merchant's inventory. Horses from Arabia were prized by courts and armies, and special slaves could be valuable gifts. Infrastructure in the shape of ports and caravan towns and oases were developed. The pioneers must be commended for overcoming the many hazards, including primitive transportation. Apart from religion and philosophy, there was interest in medicine and science, arts and crafts, architecture and town planning, and so on. The author carefully examines the areas of knowledge that circulated between South Asia and China, the routes and networks utilised, the objects exchanged, etc.

The routes and their development present a fascinating study. The Central Asian and maritime routes have, perhaps, acquired greater salience in historical narratives since Western scholars and historians have focused on them; but the land route from eastern India through Burma, Tibet, and Eastern China was also important. The BCIM Forum is a current attempt to resuscitate it. If China's Belt and Road Initiative were to evolve into a participatory multilateral enterprise, it could bring development and prosperity once more to neglected areas in Asia.

Chinese rulers appear to have been relatively open to foreign ideas. In Xian, a Muslim minority and a mosque came into existence during the Tang period, and evidence of Nestorian Christianity is also found there. China's western borders were more vulnerable than the Himalayas, and the Great Wall was part of the response.

Chinese policy generally sought a system of tributaries beyond her borders. Her civil service subtly translated communications to their emperors into what they wanted to hear while doing the same to assuage the egos of most tributary sovereigns. The naval expeditions of Admiral Zhang during the Ming period probably represent the first effort to extend a Chinese official, but not imperial presence into South Asia and beyond to the Gulf and Africa. This pattern was to guide the Portuguese, the first Europeans to come with their ships, traders and priests. But these relatively free exchanges were soon to be constrained by the European colonial pattern of territorial acquisition.

Knowledge and trade did take place beyond Asia, to Europe and Africa especially, as ships and their mariners acquired the ability to venture away from the shore and directly across oceans using the stars to navigate and seasonal winds for traction. Along with the Renaissance in Europe, new concepts of trade and governance began to animate the governments and merchants of those countries. The concept of empires, which would enrich the metropolitan state in various ways beyond trading in local commodities, came into being. This included plantations of cash crops cultivated by slaves from Africa and, later, by indentured labour largely from India and China, as well as the exploitation of timber, the mining of gold, precious stones, other minerals and oil, etc. Infrastructure also provided rich returns as ships were built, and ports, roads and railways developed. The trading company soon discovered that it required military forces to over-awe recalcitrant local rulers, then to maintain law and order, and later to repel domestic and overseas challenges. As the local rulers were displaced, colonial governments took over. For a while, myths such as the existence of a master race, or that enlightened governments had to implant civilisation in dark continents, etc. were bandied around. However the reality was that the colonial governments were able to draw upon superior military technology and training for local levies paid for by trading profits.

The Indian Army was, perhaps, the finest example of this concept. At the height of the British Empire, it served its masters in London (who soon became the British Government) faithfully across Asia, and even in Europe and Africa. Traditions were created by which Indian soldiers and British officers became partners in a myth that raised the King Emperor to a deity they jointly served with a fierce loyalty. Others were to establish the French Foreign Legion, and the Arab Legion, etc. But the Indian Army's contribution remains the most prominent. The supporting role of the Royal Navy was also indispensable. Without them, Hong Kong and the Treaty Ports could never have been established; the opium trade from India to China would probably have never taken place; and much of the current Indian mercantile establishments in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras might have been slower to develop.

The demise of empires was swift. It began with the Japanese defeat of the European colonial powers in Asia in 1942. The old systems could not recover. The economic rationale had disappeared. By 1948, India, Burma, and Sri Lanka were independent. The rest followed with considerable strife and bloodshed in the next few decades.

During the height of the imperial period, linkages with the colonial power

superseded local connections in almost every field. However, as national aspirations began to emerge in Asia after World War I, those elites began to rediscover their neighbours. When leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru visited Asian countries, Pan-Asian sentiments were voiced, along with calls for independence. China and Japan had not been colonised in the same manner as the rest of Asia, but the major colonial powers had established dominance using force and unequal treaties, etc. Japan defeated Russia in 1905 and, for a while, sought to partner the other imperial powers in East Asia. The Asian Relations Conference convened by Nehru just before India became independent and tried to enunciate a new doctrine of cooperation for the future independent Asian polities. But that vision was not to be, and was not even revived by Bandung. Asia was soon to be mired in state rivalries, complicated by cold war linkages.

Prominent among them is the India-China equation. Despite warm exchanges in 1949 when diplomatic relations were established, and the 1954 Treaty which attempted to settle Tibetan problems, the boundary dispute has festered, and a war was fought in 1962. Since then, China has long made common cause with Pakistan and has, more recently, begun to encroach on the Indian position among other neighbours. The author concludes that the border dispute can only be resolved by external mediation, as once suggested by Bertrand Russell. However, despite strident claims by both sides, the border itself has remained almost without incident since 1962. There have been moments when it seemed both sides were willing to accept the status quo; but have been unable to do so because of their visions of a wider Asian role, and now, of a global role.

The reorganisation of the world order is still incomplete. Its domination by the "international community" centred on the Atlantic was a continuation of the imperial model based on the Congress of Vienna. This is being fundamentally eroded as the Pacific and Indian Ocean states, including the whole of Asia and much of the Americas and Africa, are gradually establishing themselves as the major nodes in a multi polar world of nation states. China is projecting herself as the major player in Eurasia, if not in the world. India sees herself as a major challenger. Chinese economic and military capacities are superior today to all but the USA, and will grow faster. India has a demographic advantage, but it must develop skills at home, become more effective economically, more integrated politically into its neighbourhood, and ensure its rightful place in world supply chains.

The central question before the world today is: does India want a hegemon

which is on offer from the Chinese one party system with socialist characteristics? Or, does it want the American deep state? Or, does it want a populist isolationist US president? It would seem to this observer that a more democratic framework is required, given rapid technological advances and aspirations for global equity. This could be envisaged in a multipolar globalised system. But this would only work if regulation is ensured by consent, and not by veto. Most political elites still rely on an out of date jingoistic nationalism. How do we change all this? If India and China really represent the best of the world's civilisations, their best minds should be jointly looking for answers to this conundrum.

This narrative of the connected history of India and China is a monumental contribution not just for historians, but also for all those interested in Asia, its storied past, and its possible glorious future. It should inspire all Asians to work together for that future.

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