

Sino-Indian Contacts Through North East India

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The cultural and commercial contacts between India and China can be dated back to a hoary antiquity. Since both these countries are vast in size, they were connected with each other through different routes. At least the following three routes were the busiest routes connecting India and China.¹

1. The Northern or North-Western Route
2. The Eastern or North-Eastern Route
3. The Sea-Route connecting the Bay of Bengal with the South China Sea.

Of these three routes, the sea-route was chronologically the latest. The North-Western route which terminated in the Silk Route was familiar to the travellers as early as the 2nd century B. C. On the other hand, the North-Eastern Route was in use even prior to that period.

The Chinese traveller Tchang K'ien is credited with the discovery of the Central Asiatic or the North-Western route during the reign of Emperor Wou-Ti (140-87 B.C.) but when he travelled by this route for the first time he was astonished to find Chinese bamboos and fabrics being sold in Bactria and to learn that they reached there through the Caravans which traversed Northern India and brought them from South China to Afghanistan. This clearly shows that even before the discovery of the North-Western route, Chinese goods were regularly brought to Bactria through the Grand Trunk Road which linked the North-Western region of India to the North-Eastern region. The North-Eastern route is thus the oldest of all the three routes referred to above.

Another significant evidence of the antiquity of the eastern land route is afforded by the prevalence of the word "*China*" as the name for China in ancient India. "*China*" is said to be originally a Malayan name given to the coastal province of Kuang-Tung in the southern part of China. India derived the name "*China*" for China because its earliest contact with that country was through the eastern land route which ran through ancient Magadha,

Kamarupa (Assam), Kirata³ (the hilly states of North-Eastern India and Burma).

It is further interesting to note that in the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, "Sinai" is mentioned as a country to the east of India. Ptolemy calls the same country by the name "Thinai". These are certainly the derivatives of the name "China" mentioned in ancient Indian literature in the context of China. On the other hand, the classical writers used the name "Seres" or "Serika" in the context of China. "Seres" actually represents northern China. The classical writers used the name for China because their information was based on the accounts of travellers on the Silk route which touched China from the west. In India this name was not known at all because China was reached mostly through the eastern land route.

The contact between India and China long before the discovery of the Central Asiatic route presupposes a regular intercourse of the Indians and the Chinese along the eastern land route. This intercourse is corroborated by the 18th century Tibetan writer Dharmasuryasribhadra who has stated that formerly China was known to the Indians as Purvavideha. Purvavideha has been identified with the province of Yunnan bordering with Thailand. This shows that the region of Yunnan served as a crossroad of the Indians and the Chinese during ancient times⁵.

Buddha Prakash has rightly pointed out that if the Pubbavideha or Purvavideha of the Buddhist accounts is identical with Videharaj or the region of Yunnan referred to above, the tradition of the migration of the people from it to the province of Videha in eastern India under king Mandhatri may be equated with the theory of Parker that the Nan-Tchao Kingdom expanded westwards upto Magadha and embraced Assam and the Valley of the Ganga⁶. Pelliot has stated that the Thai people of Yunnan occupied the regions of the Upper Irrawaddy and penetrated upto Manipur and Assam in ancient times. This points to the contacts of the people of eastern India and Yunnan and show that they date from fairly early times⁷.

Pelliot further holds that the goods of Yunnan and Szechuan were brought into India by the Burma Road which passed through Yung-Tchang and Wan-Ting. Walter Liebenthal has also confirmed the existence of commercial contacts between India and China through the eastern land route. According to him from Szechuan in South China, it proceeded to Lhasa in Tibet and thence it entered India through Assam⁸. The Chinese pilgrims Hui-lin,

Hluen-Tsang and I-tsing have also mentioned this route. I-tsing particularly has noted that twenty Chinese monks arrived in India during the reign of Srigupta and constructed a temple for themselves which was named as the Chinese Temple.⁹ According to Pelliot these pilgrims came by the Burma Road. He has further pointed out that the Burma Road existed even during the 2nd century B. C. On the basis of this evidence Pelliot has pointed out that the region of Yunnan was in contact with India from the 3rd century B. C. or even earlier and it was along the routes passing through it that India entered into cultural and commercial contacts with China¹⁰. These observations leave no doubt about the fact that the eastern land route was the oldest artery of Sino-Indian relations. In the Mahabharata also the contacts between India and China have been associated with the North-Eastern region of India. The epic mentions the presence of Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha or Assam on the battlefield of Kurukshetra along with his army which was recruited from the *Chinas* and *Kiratas*. In the Sabha-parva, Bhagadatta is described as surrounded by the Kiratas and Chinas. In the Bhishmaparva the corps of this king consisting of the Kiratas and Chinas of yellow colour have been compared with the forest of Karnikara. According to the puranic geography, the Kiratas represented all the people living to the east of India. In the epics even the dwellers of the Eastern Archipelago were treated as Kiratas.¹¹ Thus the connection of the Kiratas and Chinas is a sure indication of the fact that the Indians came to know of the Chinese through the eastern route, and considered them as an eastern people having affinities to the Kiras or Kiratas of East-Indian territories. The name Kirata is derived from "Kirati", a tribe originally living in eastern Nepal. Later on the name Kirata was applied to all the people of Indo-Burmese origin.¹²

The association of the Chinas with Kiratas and other people of NorthEast India is substantiated by Epigraphic sources also. An inscription from Nagarjunikonda in A. P. belonging to the reign of Ikshvaku king Virapurushadatta (3rd century A. D.) mentions the Ceylonese monks converted to Buddhism, the people of China, Chilata (Kirata), Vanga (Bengal) etc.¹³ In the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea and Ptolemy's Geography also, the Cilatas, or Kiratas have been associated with the region around the Bay of Bengal. They played the role of intermediaries between India and China.

Glimpses of the hectic commercial activities in the North-Eastern region of India can be seen throughout the ancient and

medieval period. According to the Mahabharata the gold brought by the Khasas and Tanganas from Central Asia occupied an important place in the commerce of this region. The Pipilikas (a tribe of Mongolian or Tibetan origin) brought gold. Kamarupa sent horses, jade and ivory handles. Jade perhaps came from upper Burma. Magadha was famous for the manufacture and export of inlaid furniture beds, chariots and other vehicles, elephants, carpets and arrow-heads. The Kiratas of Indo-Burmese origin brought from the eastern frontier region, gold, agallochum, precious stones, sandalwood and other aromatics. They also dealt in slaves, precious birds and animals. Bengal and Orissa were famous for the cotton cloth and elephants.¹⁴

The Periplus mentions that this region exported silkgoods and Malabathrum. Fine muslin fabrics and tortoise shells were also exported from this region.¹⁵

The reference to the horse trade in this region as mentioned in the Mahabharata is curious. Horses were imported into India from West Asia. It seems that the same were exported to South-East Asia through this region. If this observation is correct, it can be presumed that the traders of this region worked as middlemen in the silk trade as well as the horse trade. The continuity of this trade during the medieval period is attested to by the Persian accounts of Muslim traders.¹⁶

The region formed by the contiguous parts of India, Burma, Thailand and China was known as Purvavideha in the Buddhist literature. This was the extension of the Videha region of Eastern India. Its close contacts with India resulted into the spread of Indian culture in this region.

Occasionally the whole region formed a part of a single kingdom under the leadership of the tribes of Indo-Burmese origin. The Ahom kingdom of Assam which flourished during the medieval period was probably the latest of this sequel. In this way the history and culture of North East India is closely associated with the Sino-Indian Cultural and Commercial contact from time immemorial.

Notes & References

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