

The Book Review, 2007

Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations,
600-1400

by Tansen Sen
(Manohar, New Delhi, 2004)
Pages 388 + xvi
Price Rs.750

It is a delight to pick up a book such as this one, based as it is on original research, much of it of a cross-regional, inter-disciplinary character, taking full advantage of the author's Chinese language skills (as a post-graduate from 'Beida', China's most prestigious university), and felicity of personal contact in India, China and Japan. Truly, we see too little of such work output among our home-based scholars.

Tansen Sen deserves praise for making accessible to the student of history and to the general reader new, revealing perspective of a period for which we have to depend on sources outside India, since little material relating to post-Harsha rule in India, after the 7th century is available from our sources, and at school we have been brought up on the nostrum that this was a 'dark age' for much of the country. Sen says at the outset that the common perception has been that India-China interactions peaked during the Tang period (607-918) and declined rapidly thereafter. This overlooks the thriving state of Buddhism in eastern India in the 9th and 10th century, and under the Song dynasty (960-1279) in China. No less vital were the secular exchanges in trade, both across the Silk Road, and the even more prolific commerce via the maritime route. Sen narrates the way sugar-making technology was taken to China by Indian monks in the Tang epoch, used initially for rituals, and becoming a staple commodity only in the Song era, 10th century onwards.

In the Song era the numbers monks traveling between India and China 'may even have surpassed the exchanges during the Tang period'; the same was true of Indian Buddhist texts translated during this period. Sen's aim is to 'rectify this model of pre-modern relations'. Chapter 3 of the book examines these exchanges, making the point that despite the high intensity of these links, what changed during this period was that 'shift in doctrinal interest of the Chinese clergy towards indigenous and practices rendered new teachings from India obsolete'. The growth of indigenous schools in China transformed the Buddhist doctrines to such an extent that 'they became radically distinct from their Indic origins...it abated the Chinese aspirations for doctrinal inputs from the Indian Buddhist community.'

Surely this is in the very nature of cultural interchange between civilizations. Export of religion, philosophy or language, when it takes root in the new country will always indigenize, developing into new forms that adopt a trajectory of their own, and diminish dependence on further import. What emerges in the receiving country is a domestic product, built on the genius and ethos of its people. This makes up the panorama of Asia. The great Japanese scholar Hajime Nakamura called the result a set of cultures that have 'no single "Eastern" feature', and yet 'there is a certain logical and human connection among these characteristics' (*Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan*, 1964). Sen's study assists contemporary

in establishing a better baseline for the quality and value of the India-China interchanges that he presents in an integral, holistic perspective.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Sen narrate the growth of secular trade exchanges after the 10th century, with shifts in trade routes and the establishment of Islamic trade networks, which remained intensive through to the middle of the 15th century.

One of my indelible memories of China is a visit to the renowned stele (stone tablet) museum at Loyang in 1971 on a ‘diplomatic tour’, typical of those days, when three representatives of each embassy were taken by special train on a week-long carefully designed excursion to places of political, economic and cultural importance. As a Chinese-language speaker I broke away from the group to look at some of the tablets on my own, when a museum official approached me, and after a brief conversation in which I identified myself, he showed me a tablet with an inscription in Chinese and Sanskrit, showing a Chinese monk of the Song dynasty period, walking over ocean waves, carrying his shoes at the end of stick on his shoulder. He remarked on his own; ‘With such a shared history, how can we persist in our current problems!’ It took courage in those difficult days for a Chinese to speak in such fashion.

Sen looks at the role played by the trading ports and the mercantile guilds of the Chola period in linking the markets of China to what was then the global economy. He ends the book with a reference to the flotilla of 63 ships, with a crew of 28,560, which Admiral Zhong led to Calicut in 1413. But while this produced global trade, it did not engender an appreciable exchange of cultural ideas between the two countries. Nor did it produce a meaningful interchange of technology.

It should serve as a gentle reminder that today, while bilateral trade is burgeoning, set to reach perhaps a figure of \$20 billion in 2005, that remarkable economic success also warrants matching growth in the other segments, especially in culture, academia, the media, science, education. History should deepen our vision of heritage.

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