BOOK REVIEW-II


As the title of the book suggests, the authors have tried to find aspects from history where India and China have actively interacted together in the past be it for cultural exchanges, diplomatic ties or for trade purposes. In addition, they (authors) have tried to use these aspects to try and explain different phenomenon such as the two starkly different paths taken by the two countries in expanding their economies and how tourism has developed for example. The book introduces me to a concept called “Asian Century” wherein they mean to suggest that with the rapid growth being shown by India and China and both being emerging global powers that the global economy will in the future will significantly be dominated by Asian economies, politics and culture. Therefore, in the light of the possibility of an Asian dominated global economy, a better understanding of the growth and the path followed by these two countries in achieving this growth is imperative.

To compare these two countries, the authors have travelled back in time to the very beginning, the Indus Valley Civilization also known as the Harrapan civilization because of its most prominent city- Harappa. The Shu Civilization was for China what the Indus Valley Civilization was for India. Both these Indus Valley Civilization and Shu Civilization are important historical components for their respective countries. These two ancient civilizations may have developed independently, have varied formation, timing and characteristics but they were not without their similarities- they were both economies based on farming, developed in ancient times and built the world’s oldest artificial irrigation system. They also engaged in cultural exchanges and held sway and influence over other civilizations as well.

It is in keeping these similarities in mind that a comparison has been made in- Water conservancy projects, City Construction and International Cultural Exchanges. Regarding Water Conservancy Projects, the book highlights how both Indus Valley and Shu Civilization were based on agriculture, there was an obvious requirement for an irrigation system. Irrigation Canals appeared on the Indus River plain around 4000 B.C. and reached a higher level around 2600 B.C. Irrigation projects were mainly for agricultural irrigation and construction of city water supply and the drainage network especially in the cities was outstanding. The construction of wells was also a major part of their water projects with around 600 found in archeological sites including cities.
The Chengdu plains which often suffered from floods was the location of one of the most advanced flood prevention system in ancient civilization. Archeological sites provide evidence of cities and towns damaged or destroyed by flood and even rebuilt/scoured repeatedly. The irrigation system mainly comprised of artificial rivers, ponds, dams and channels.

The Indus Valley Civilization had the world’s most complete city water supply and drainage system; the ancient Shu civilization harnessed rivers for water conservancy projects that not only controlled Chengdu plain floods but also helped in farmland irrigation. From then on people could control flood sand reduce the damage by flood leading to the creation of the “land of abundance”.

Urban civilization was one of the most important part of the Indus Valley civilization, so much so that it has been widely called the Harrapan civilization after one of its main cities- Harappa. In the vast region of the Indus Valley civilization, the economic and cultural outlook of every city was the same or similar irrespective of whether they were near or far. Though Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were 400km apart they were in many respects similar. The earliest town in the Shu civilization was located on the Chengdu plain-Sanxingdui.

Sanxingdui and Chengdu form the earliest city system in the ancient Shu civilization, Sanxingdui is believed to be a strong center of theocracy. Along with political and social institutions, theocracy appeared to have played an important role in the formation of the city. Cities in Indus Valley and Shu civilization possessed good planning and design along with reasonable layout and a proper foundation to support a large population.

Both the Civilizations displayed an openness in culture with the Indus Valley civilization indulging in trade with Iran Central Asia and Afghanistan but its relations with Mesopotamia have been described as “close”. The Shu Civilization that was born in Southwest China carried out exchanges with not only the central plains but also South Asia, Southeast Asia and West Asia through the Silk Road.

There were differences in culture of the two civilisations. Chinese Culture is ethical centering on Confucianism and Mencius, while India culture follows a different path by being religiously centered around Hinduism. While Chinese people and culture are united under one banner of the Chines Nation, India has been linked with several other countries therefore resulting in its culture looking like a color palette.
This book has also dedicated a large portion to trying to portray and understand Tagore’s grand hope for greater partnership between India-China, he wished for both nations to ascend to a higher platform of civilization and lead the world into a better era. The best example of this would be the creation of space for Chinese students in Tagore’s own Shanti Niketan University where Chinese students still shine bright today.

Interaction between India and China were not limited to only trade and diplomatic missions, even religious teachings were transmitted from one country to another, like in the case with the spread of Tantrism and Hinduism in China during the 15th Century. While the concept of soft power is new, soft power has undoubtedly played a major role in international politics globally.

According to this book India has a large pool of possibilities it can use to strengthen itself in terms of soft power from our cultural values to our religious diversity that has become our strength, from popular culture like Bollywood that is loved in the whole sub-continent to our educational institutes. Even NRI’s residing in various contraries across the world can become a great asset. China’s traditional cultural values can also be utilized to increase its soft power as chines culture emphasis worshipping nature, gentleness and underscoring moderation.

The authors of different chapters suggest that if China wishes to fully utilize their soft power potential they must emulate India- by discovering connections with other countries as much as possible and focusing on strengthening these connections.

China must first increase its friendly cooperation with other countries and around the world economic cooperation as well as private visits and other diplomatic meets, especially with its neighbors. In addition, China must also try to quickly present its culture to the world while at the same time being mindful of the prevailing global mindset.

In another extremely astute way that India maximizes its soft power potential is through industrialization of products symbolizing Indian culture. The best example one can think of upon hearing this is Yoga. Yoga which originated in India is widely practiced around the world and recently celebrated the 3rd International day of yoga where more than 150 countries participated in it.

China has proposed a Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar economic corridor (BCIM-EC) whose construction would greatly increase trade between India and China and facilitate increased level of cooperation. An ambitious plan but one that does not come without its problems.
China has given reasons for BCIM corridor as a converging point for the two nations. This corridor would promote Chinese development strategy and help to maintain security and stability in border areas. This corridor can help China create a zone of peaceful development and growth where once all existed was instability.

Indian reasons for wanting a corridor include- to benefit from Chinese experience, technology, trade and agricultural advantages by increasing Chinese investment into India. Another reason is that this corridor can greatly speed up the development of the Northeastern States and hopefully bring stability back to the region. If India does not agree to the forming of this corridor, then it would isolate itself and its image in the region will fall.

Another very important aspect of the economic corridor is the increased cooperation between China and Pakistan. Pakistan is a key part of China’s efforts to further integrate itself with the Asian economy and be seen as promoting the collective rise of Asia. Keeping close relations with Pakistan also helps to keep in check the rise of U.S.A.’s influence in the region, China is part of the group of sceptics that believes that the USA is trying to seize the benefits of Asia’s economic growth with its recent pivot to Asia.

Chinese Interests in the development of the region include huge economic investments, rich mineral resources over which China wants control, Afghanistan being China’s neighbor, thus it benefits China if Afghanistan has a stable government and less religious extremism. Lastly, controlling Afghanistan’s drug problem which has permeated to its neighbors.

India has long had friendly relations with the governments of Afghanistan, in addition to the economic investments and security reasons, India is one of the 4 major nations involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Cooperation between India and China when it comes to Afghanistan can be extremely beneficial for both the countries. Afghanistan has the required mineral resources that growing economies like China and India need. A deteriorating security situation would hamper the economic growth of both India and China. Of course, cooperation in Afghanistan possesses its own sets of challenges from the threat of Islamic Extremism to the influence of outside forces like the US.

In addition to the above-mentioned points, the book also talks about in detail about the manufacturing policies, health care sector and the respective social responsibilities of each country to make a comparison.
This book China and India: History, Culture, Cooperation and Competition has been an extremely informative read, the aspects on history are extremely well researched and interesting and it brings new angles and dimensions to trying to understand the India-China relationship.

China is a major factor in India’s foreign policy, not only does its close-proximity pose a security risk for India if ever our relations turn sour but its ambitious goal to expand and become a superpower in both Asia and the world put its directly in India’s path. Keeping in mind the present domestic scenario with the increased “nationalism” in a majority of the India population after the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, coupled with the recent border disputes with China in Sikkim, cooperation with China on any aspect thus becomes unlikely.

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