

IT WAS BUDDHISM THAT FOSTERED INDO-CHINESE RELATIONS

By Shri Jawaharlal Nehru

At a time when racial suspicion and hatred are taking on frightening proportions all over the world, it is well to remember that the main cause of this is the materialism which rules unabated. This article by the first Prime Minister of India shows how Buddhism which emphasizes the love for learning and culture, was at one time a potent force in bringing two great nations together. The late J.F. Kennedy also actively promoted an interest in international art and learning in the hope that this would bring the peoples of the world together. It is not too idealistic to hope that Buddhism can yet teach men to love and share instead of being engulfed in the flames of hatred, greed and delusion.

- Ed. -

India and China

It was through Buddhism that China and India came near to each other and developed many contacts. Whether there were any such contacts before Ashoka's reign we do not know; probably there was some sea-borne trade, for silk used to come from China. Yet there must have been overland contacts and migrations of peoples in far earlier periods, for Mongoloid features are common in the eastern border areas of India. In Nepal these are very marked. In Assam (Kamarupa of old) and Bengal they are often evident. Historically speaking, however, Ashoka's missionaries blazed the trail and, as Buddhism spread in China, there began that long succession of pilgrims and scholars who journeyed between India and China for 1,000 years. They travelled overland across the Gobi Desert and the plains and mountains of Central Asia and over the Himalayas – a long, hard journey full of peril. Many Indians and Chinese perished on the way, and one account says that as many as 90 per cent of these pilgrims perished. Many having managed to reach the end of their journey did not return and settled in the land of their adoption. There was another route also, not much safer, though probably shorter: this was by sea via Indo-China, Java, and Sumatra, Malaya and the Nicobar Islands. This was

also frequently used, and sometimes a pilgrim travelled overland and returned by sea. Buddhism and Indian culture had spread all over Central Asia and in parts of Indonesia, and there were large numbers of monasteries and study centres dotted all over these vast areas. Travellers from India or China thus found a welcome shelter along these routes by land and sea. Sometimes scholars from China would break journey for a few months at some Indian colony in Indonesia in order to learn Sanskrit before they came to India.

In Lo Yang

The first record of an Indian scholar's visit to China is that of *Kashyapa Matanga* who reached China in 67 A.D. in the reign of *Emperor Ming Ti* and probably at his invitation. He settled down at Lo Yang by the Lo River. *Dharmaraksha* accompanied him and, in later years, among the noted scholars who went were *Buddhabhadra*, *Jinabhadra*, *Kumarajiva*, *Paramartha*, *Jinagupta* and *Bodhidharma*. Each one of these took a group of monks or disciples with him. It is said that at one time (sixth century A.C.) there were more than 3,000 Indian Buddhist monks and 10,000 families in the Lo Yang province alone.

These Indian scholars who went to China not only carried many Sanskrit manuscripts with them, which they translated into Chinese, but some of them also wrote original books in the Chinese language. They made quite a considerable contribution to Chinese literature, including poetry. *Kumarajiva* who went to China in 401 A.C., was a prolific writer and as many as forty-seven different books written by him have come down to us. His Chinese style is supposed to be very good. He translated the life of the great Indian scholar *Nagarjuna* into Chinese. *Jinagupta* went to China in the second half of the sixth century A.C. He translated thirty-seven original Sanskrit works into Chinese. His great knowledge was so much admired that an emperor of the *T'ang* dynasty became his disciple.

Fa-Hien

There was two-way traffic between India and China and many Chinese scholars came here. Among the best known who have left records of their journeys are Fa Hien (or *Fa Hsien*), *Sung Yun*, *Hsuan-Tsang* (or *Chwen Chuang*), and *I-Tsing* (or *Yi-Tsing*). *Fa-Hien* came to India in the fifth century; he was a disciple of *Kumarajiva* in China. There is an interesting account of what *Kumarajiva* told him on the eve of his departure for India, when he went to take leave of the teacher. *Kumarajiva* charged him not to spend all his time in gathering religious knowledge only but to study in some detail the life and habits of the people of India, so that

China might understand them and their country as a whole. *Fa Hien* studied at Pataliputra University.

Hsuan-Tsang

The most famous of the Chinese travellers to India was *Hsuan-Tsang* who came in the seventh century when the great *T'ang* dynasty flourished in China and *Harsha Vardhana* ruled over an empire in North India. *Hsuan-Tsang* came overland across the Gobi Desert and passing Turfan and Kucha, Taskhand and Samarkand, Balkh, Khotan and Yarkand, crossed the Himalayas into India. He tells us of his many adventures, of the perils he overcame, of the Buddhist rulers and monasteries in Central Asia, and of the Turks there who were ardent Buddhists. In India he travelled all over the country, greatly honoured and respected everywhere, making accurate observations of places and peoples, and noting down some delightful and some fantastic stories that he heard. Many years he spent at the great *Nalanda University*, not far from Pataliputra, which was famous for its many-sided learning and attracted students from far corners of the country. It is said that as many as 10,000 students and monks were in residence there. *Hsuan-Tsang* took the degree of Master of the Law there and finally became vice-principal of the university.

Hsuan-Tsang's book – the *Si-Yu-Ki* or the *Record of the Western Kingdom* (meaning India), makes fascinating reading. Coming from a highly civilized and sophisticated country, at a time when China's capital *Si-an-fu* was a centre of art and learning, his comments on and descriptions of conditions in India are valuable. He tells us of the system of education which began early and proceeded by stages to the university where the five branches of knowledge taught were: (1) Grammar, (2) Science of Arts and Crafts, (3) Medicine, (4) Logic, and (5) Philosophy. He was particularly struck by the love of learning of the Indian people. Some kind of primary education was fairly widespread as all the monks and priests were teachers. Of the people he says: '*With respect to the ordinary people, although they are naturally light-minded, yet they are upright and honourable. In money matters they are without craft, and in administering justice they are considerate They are not deceitful or treacherous in their conduct, and are faithful in their oaths and promises. In their rules of government there is remarkable rectitude, whilst in their behavior there is much gentleness and sweetness. With respect to criminals or rebels, these are few in number, and only occasionally troublesome.*' He says further: '*As the administration of the government is founded on benign principles, the executive is simple People are not subject to forced labour In this way taxes on people are light The merchants who engage in commerce come and go in carrying out their transactions.*'

Via Central Asia

Hsuan-Tsang returned the way he came, via Central Asia, carrying a large number of manuscripts with him. From his account one gathers a vivid impression of the wide sway of Buddhism in Khorasan, Iraq, Mosul and right up to the frontiers of Syria. And yet this was a time when Buddhism was in decay there and Islam, already beginning in Arabia, was soon to spread out over all these lands. About the Iranian people, *Hsuan-Tsang* makes an interesting observation: they ‘care not for learning, but give themselves entirely to works of art. All they make the neighbouring countries value very much.’

Iran then, as before and after, concentrated on adding to the beauty and grace of life, and its influence spread far in Asia. Of the strange little kingdom of Turfan, on the edge of the Gobi Desert, *Hsuan-Tsang* tells us, and we have learned more about it in recent years from the work of archaeologists. Here many cultures came and mixed and coalesced, producing a rich combination which drew its inspiration from China and India and Persia and even the Hellenic sources. The language was Indo-European, derived from India and Iran, and resembling in some ways the Celtic languages of Europe; the religion came from India; the ways of life were Chinese; many of the artistic wares they had were from Iran. The statues and frescoes of the Buddhas and gods and goddesses, beautifully made, have often Indian draperies and Grecian head-dresses. These goddesses, says *Monsieur Grousset*, ‘represent the happiest combination of Hindu suppleness, Hellenic eloquence, and Chinese charm.’

Hsuan-Tsang went back to his homeland, welcomed by his Emperor and his people, and settled down to write his book and translate the many manuscripts he had brought. When he had started on his journey, many years earlier, there is a story that the *Emperor T'ang* mixed a handful of dust in a drink and offered this to him, saying: ‘*You would do well to drink this cup, for are we not told that a handful of one's country's soil is worth more than ten thousand pounds of foreign gold?*’

Hsuan-Tsang's visit to India and the great respect in which he was held both in China and India led to the establishment of political contacts between the rulers of the two countries, *Harshavardhana* of Kanauj and the *T'ang Emperor* exchanged embassies. *Hsuan-Tsang* himself remained in touch with India, exchanging letters with friends there and receiving manuscripts. Two interesting letters, originally written in Sanskrit, have been preserved in China. One of these was written in 654 A.C. by an Indian Buddhist scholar, *Sthavira Prajnadeva*, to *Hsuan-Tsang*. After

greeting and news about common friends and their literary work, he proceeds to say: 'We are sending you a pair of white cloths to show that we are not forgetful. The road is long, so do not mind the smallness of the present. We wish you may accept it. As regards the Sutras and Shastras which you may require please send us a list. We will copy them and send them to you.' *Hsuan-Tsang* in his reply says: 'I learnt from an ambassador who recently came back from India that the great teacher *Shilabhadra* was no more. This news overwhelmed me with grief that knew no bounds Among the Sutras and Shastras that I, *Hsuan-Tsang*, had brought with me I have already translated the *Yogacharyabhumi-Shastra* and other works, in all thirty volumes. I should humbly let you know that while crossing the Indus I had lost a load of sacred texts. I now send you a list of the texts annexed to this letter. I request you to send them to me if you get the chance. I am sending some small articles as presents. Please accept them.'

Hsuan-Tsang has told us much of Nalanda University, and there are other accounts of it also. Yet when I went, some years ago, and saw the excavated ruins of Nalanda I was amazed at their extent and the huge scale on which it was planned. Only a part of it has so far been uncovered, and over the rest there are inhabited localities, but even this part consisted of huge courts surrounded by stately buildings in stone.

Soon after *Hsuan-Tsang*'s death in China, yet another famous Chinese pilgrim made the journey to India – *I-tsing* (or *Yi-tsing*). He started in 671 A.C., and it took him nearly two years to reach the Indian port of Tamralipti, at the mouth of the Hooghly. For he came by sea and stopped for many months at Shribhoga (modern Palembang in Sumatra) to study Sanskrit. This journey of his by sea has a certain significance, for it is probable that there were disturbed conditions in Central Asia then and political changes were taking place. Many of the friendly Buddhist monasteries that dotted the land route may have ceased to exist. It is also likely that the sea route was more convenient with the growth of Indian colonies in Indonesia, and constant trade and other contacts between India and these countries. It appears from his and other accounts that there was at that time regular navigation between Persia (Iran), India, Malaya, Sumatra, and China. *I-tsing* sailed in a Persian ship from Kwangtung, and went first to Sumatra.

Nalanda University

I-tsing also studied at Nalanda University for a long time and carried back with him several hundred Sanskrit texts. He was chiefly interested in the fine points of Buddhist ritual and ceremonial and has written in detail about them. But he tells us

much also about customs, clothes, and food. Wheat was the staple diet in North India, as now, and rice in the south and the east. Meat was sometimes eaten, but this was rare. (*I-tsing* probably tells us more about the Buddhist monks than about others). Ghee (clarified butter), oil, milk, and cream were found everywhere, and cakes and fruits were abundant. *I-tsing* noted the importance that Indians have always attached to a certain ceremonial purity. 'Now the first and chief difference between India of the five regions and other nations is the peculiar distinction between purity and impurity.' Also: 'To preserve what has been left from the meal, as is done in China, is not at all in accordance with Indian rules.'

I-tsing refers to India generally as the West (Si-fang), but he tells us that it was known as *Aryadesha* – '*the Aryadesha*'; 'arya' means noble, 'desha' region – the noble region, a name for the west. It is so called because men of noble character appear there successively, and people all praise the land by that name. It is also called *Madhyadesha*, i.e., the middle land, for it is the centre of a hundred myriads of countries. The people are all familiar with this name. The northern tribes (Hu or Mongols or Turks) alone call the Noble Land 'Hindu' (Hsin-tu), but this is not at all a common name; it is only a vernacular name, and has no special significance. The people of India do not know this designation, and the most suitable name for India is the 'Noble Land'.

I-tsing's reference to 'Hindu' is interesting. He goes on to say: 'Some say that *Indu* means the moon and the Chinese name for India, i.e., *Indu* (Yin-tu), is derived from it. Although it might mean this, it is nevertheless not the common name. As for the Indian name for Great Chou (China), i.e. *Cheena*, it is only a name and has no special meaning.' He also mentions the Sanskrit names for Korea and other countries.

For all his admiration for India and many things Indian, *I-tsing* made it clear that he gave first place to his native land, China. India might be the 'noble region,' but China was the 'divine land'. 'The people of the five parts of India are proud of their own purity and excellence. But high refinement, literary elegance, propriety, moderation, ceremonies of welcoming and parting, the delicious taste of food, and the richness of benevolence and righteousness are found in China only, and no other country can excel her.' 'In the healing arts of acupuncture and cauterization and the skill of feeling the pulse, China has never been superseded by any part of India; the medicament for prolonging life is only found in China From the character of men and the quality of things China is called the "divine land". Is there anyone in the five parts of India who does not admire China?'

The word used in the old Sanskrit for the Chinese Emperor is *deva-putra*, which is an exact translation of 'Son of Heaven'.

I-tsing, himself a fine scholar in Sanskrit praises the language and says it is respected in far countries in the north and south 'How much more then should people of the divine land (China), as well as the celestial store house (India), teach the real rules of the language!' These extracts have been taken from J. Takakusu's translation of *I-tsing's: "A record of the Buddhist Religions as practised in India and Malay Archipelago" (Oxford, 1896).*

Sanskrit scholarship must have been fairly widespread in China. It is interesting to find that some Chinese scholars tried to introduce Sanskrit phonetics into the Chinese language. A well-known example of this is that of the monk *Shon Wen*, who lived at the time of the T'ang dynasty. He tried to develop an alphabetical system along these lines in Chinese.

Decay of Buddhism

With the decay of Buddhism in India this Indo-Chinese commerce of scholars practically ceased, though pilgrims from China occasionally came to visit the holy places of Buddhism in India. During the political revolution from the eleventh century A.C. onwards, crowds of Buddhist monks, carrying bundles of manuscripts, went to Nepal or crossed the Himalayas, into Tibet. A considerable part of old Indian literature thus and previously, found its way to China and Tibet and in recent years it has been discovered afresh in the original or more frequently, in translations. Many Indian classics have been preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations relating not only to Buddhism but also to Brahminism, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, etc. There are supposed to be 8,000 such works in the Sung-pao collection in China. Tibet is full of them. There used to be frequent co-operation between Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan scholars. A notable instance of this co-operation, still extant, is a Sanskrit-Tibetan-Chinese dictionary of Buddhist technical terms. This dates from the ninth or tenth century A.C. and is named the '*Mahavyutpatti*.'

Printing in China

Among the most ancient printed books discovered in China, dating from the eighth century A.C., are books in Sanskrit. These were printed from wooden blocks. In the tenth century the Imperial Printing Commission was organized in China and as a result of this, and right up to the Sung era, the art of printing developed rapidly.

It is surprising and difficult to account for that, in spite of the close contacts between Indian and Chinese scholars and their exchanges of books and manuscripts for hundreds of years, there is no evidence whatever of the printing of books in India during that period. Block printing went to Tibet from China at some early period and, I believe, it is still practised there. Chinese printing was introduced into Europe during the Mongol or Yuan dynasty (1260-1368). First known in Germany, it spread to other countries during the fifteenth century.

Even during the Indo-Afghan and Mughal periods in India there was occasional diplomatic intercourse between India and China. *Mohammed bin Tughlak*, Sultan of Delhi (1326-51) sent the famous Arab traveller, *Ibn Batuta*, as ambassador to the Chinese court. Bengal had at that time shaken off the suzerainty of Delhi and became an independent sultanate. In the middle of the fourteenth century the Chinese court sent two ambassadors, *Hu-Shien* and *Fin-Shien*, to the Bengal Sultan. This led to a succession of ambassadors being sent from Bengal to China during *Sultan Ghias-ud-Din's* reign. This was the period of the Ming Emperors in China. One of the later embassies, sent in 1414 by *Saif-ud Din*, carried valuable presents, among them a live giraffe. How a giraffe managed to reach India is a mystery: probably it came as a gift from Africa and was sent on to the *Ming Emperor* as a rarity which would be appreciated. It was indeed greatly appreciated in China where a giraffe is considered an auspicious symbol by the followers of *Confucius*. There is no doubt that the animal was a giraffe for, apart from a long account of it, there is also a Chinese picture of it on silk. The court artist, who made this picture, has written a long account in praise of it and of the good fortune that flows from it. 'The ministers and the people all gathered to gaze at it and their joy knows no end.'

Trade

Trade between India and China which had flourished during the Buddhist period, was continued throughout the Indo-Afghan and Mughal periods, and there was a continuous exchange of commodities. The trade went overland across the northern Himalayan passes and along the old caravan routes of Central Asia. There was also a considerable sea-borne trade, via the islands of south-east Asia, chiefly to south Indian ports.

During these thousand years and more of intercourse between India and China, each country learned something from the other, not only in the regions of thought and philosophy, but also in the arts and sciences of life. Probably China was more influenced by India than India by China, which is a pity, for India could well have received, with profit to herself, some of the sound commonsense of the Chinese,

and with its aid checked her own extravagant fancies. China took much from India but she was always strong and self-confident enough to take it in her own way and fit it in somewhere in her own texture of life. Even Buddhism and its intricate philosophy became tinged with the doctrines of *Confucius* and *Lao-tze*. The somewhat pessimistic outlook of Buddhist philosophy could not change or suppress the love of life and gaiety of the Chinese.

There is an old Chinese proverb which says 'If the government gets hold of you, they'll flog you to death; if the Buddhists get hold of you, they'll starve you to death!'

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