

India and China: The Long View

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Tansen Sen: *India, China, and the World:
A Connected History*,
Oxford University Press, 2018

Tansen Sen's book comes at a very crucial time in the discourse on India-China relations when the idea of a 'reset' is gaining ground. The last few years have witnessed some flashpoints especially with regard to the border issue. Even though India and China have conducted some 20 rounds of border negotiations, a solution appears elusive. The establishment of stronger governments has resulted in an upsurge of nationalism. The concepts of 'national pride' and 'national humiliation' have also gained increased impetus. However, efforts are still being made by governments, business, and intellectuals to peaceful, stable and civilisational interactions between India and China. This however overlooks the reality of a multi-dimensional regional, nationalistic and volatile relationship between two modern large states with at times divergent aspirations. Moreover, the idea of a civilisational, Buddhist and peaceful historical relationship is vigorously contested by the reality of national strategic competition, border tensions and mistrust.

Tansen provides a long view, a more nuanced perspective across an extended time frame. He also discusses the changes in the focal areas of interactions and issues. What he sets out to prove is that: the India-China interaction is more complex and multidirectional than that suggested by a narrative of a linear bilateral exchange of ideas, cultures, and commerce. There are a number of other actors who have played a crucial role in building the connection between India and China.

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He is critical of the general understanding of Buddhism as the dominant factor in connecting India and China and enumerates several other actors who have played an important role in shaping the relationship. He argues that, "most of Asia was integrated into networks that connected South Asia and China through the movement of people, the translation of texts, the use of medical and astronomical knowledge, the re-imagination/reinterpretation of knowledge, and,.... long distance commercial activity" (p. 106). The book provides a detailed account of these channels and networks that connected India and China via other regions and routes. He argues that a considerable amount of the movement of information between the two vast political and cultural zones, took place because of these channels. In fact, a large volume of information was shared and communicated via South East Asia and Central Asia. Tansen dedicates a significant portion of the book to the study of these diverse channels and routes backed by data and references.

He, however, lets down by the section covering the more recent history and developments. There is a clear need for a more detailed discussion of the developments that followed the Opium Wars. The first section is so detailed and informative that one feels let down while reading the sections on recent history.

The sections dealing with the time frame after the establishment of the Republic of India (ROI, 1947) and the People's Republic of China (PRC, 1949) is too short and feels kind of abrupt. Yet it is here that the roots of the major problem in the contemporary relationship lies. Mistrust and conflict emerged during this period and dominates the relationship even today. According to Tansen, "This mixture of fascination, ambivalence, and suspicion, and not just the "Bhai-Bhai" catchphrase, defined the first decade of ROI-PRC interactions" (p. 381). This was also a transitional phase from, what can be described as, 'civilisational' to 'nation-state' identities. Both India and China were transitioning, and this brought a number of 'contentious' issues to the forefront. The difference in worldview, realpolitik and geopolitics affected the India-China relationship and resulted in the 1962 War, the shadows of which still impact the dialogue between the countries.

While discussing the 1962 War, the author juxtaposes the historical and the current developments. He argues:

Although brief, the armed conflict fundamentally questioned the relevance of the rhetoric of brotherly affinity and a harmonious past that was promoted during the first half of the twentieth century. It demonstrated, as was clear during the earlier periods as well, the weakness of romanticized ideals of pan-Asianism and the political ambitions that were connected to the ideology..... Indeed, Asia was no longer, and perhaps never had been one. (p. 372).

This argument summarises the author's basic perception about Asian history. The multitude of states and the differing ambitions of their leaders prevent Asia from becoming 'one'. After the end of the colonial period, as nationalism came to the forefront, the Asian region remained divided, and mistrust prevailed among many of the neighbours. Tansen highlights the principal events which led to this development.

One of the most interesting and unique aspects of the book is the section where the author discusses the impressions of an Indian travelling to China after the establishment of the ROI and the PRC. It is fascinating to read this section and realise as to how different the perceptions in the two countries were and how they were formed. It also underlines the need to study the people-to-people contacts more minutely as they are an essential catalyst in shaping domestic public opinion.

It would not be far-fetched to argue that modern India-China relations are deeply shaped by the nation-state dynamics. It is a practice for some to highlight the civilisational history and paint it in the colours of peace and unity. However, such an understanding has not helped this relationship. There is a need to comprehend that today, both India and China are strong and vibrant nation states, with their individual concerns about security and national interests. Nationalism and public opinion play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy. The saying, 'good fences make good neighbours' is apt for describing what needs to be done to improve India-China relations. Even though today they are among the largest economies in the world with annual bilateral trade rising year after year, this has not ended the existing suspicion about each other's intentions. When India and China discuss mutual concerns, they primarily 'talk at each other' rather than talk with each other. There is a pressing need to bridge the gap between the people to bring about a change. The top-down approaches for improving the relationship and reducing misunderstandings have not proved successful. India and China continue to be

neighbours who are aware of each other's existence, but do not understand each other.

The book is a rich contribution to the existing literature on the subject. It is a must-read for scholars and students working on India and China.