

Book Discussion

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Understanding Indian Borderlands

Dilip K Chakrabarti

The Indian subcontinent shares borders with Iran, Afghanistan, the plateau of Tibet and Myanmar. The sub-continent's influence extends beyond these borders, creating distinct 'borderlands' which are basically geographical, political, economic and religious interaction zones. It is these 'borderlands' which historically constitute the subcontinent's 'area of influence' and underlines its civilizational role in the Asian landmass. A clear understanding of this civilizational role may be useful in strengthening India's perception of her own geo-strategic position.

Iran

One may begin with Iran at the western limit of these borderland. There are two main mountain ranges in Iran : the Zagros which separates Iran from Iraq and has to its south the plain of Khuzestan giving access to south Iraq ; and the Elburz which separates the inland Iran from the Caspian belt, Turkmenistan and (to a limited extent , Azerbaijan). The Caspian shores form a well-wooded verdant belt which poses a strong contrast to the dry Iranian plateau. There are two deserts inside the Iranian plateau -- *dasht-i-lut* and *dasht-i-kevir*, which do not encourage human habitation. The population concentration of Iran is along the margins of the mountain belt and also in Khuzestan.

The following facts are noteworthy. The eastern rim of Iran carries an imprint of the subcontinent. There is a ready access to Iranian Baluchistan through the Kej valley in Pakistani Baluchistan. At its eastern edge this valley leads both to lower Sindh and Kalat. From the side of Iranian Baluchistan, there is easy access to the Fars area of Iran with Kirman and Shiraz as its prominent points. From Shiraz, the whole of western Iran including Khuzestan is open. Pakistani Baluchistan's northern portion also gives easy access

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to Iranian Baluchistan. From Zahidan in Iran to Quetta in Pakistan, there is a running railway system, reflection of the age-old links between the two segments. From Zahidan one can move up the eastern rim of the Iranian plateau to Meshed located at a kind of junction point of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Iran. Also, from Zahidan one can approach Kirman and Shiraz via Bam.

Thus, from the entire Sindh-Baluchistan area to the heart of western Iran there can be an easy movement of people and goods. The routes are defined and have witnessed interaction through the ages. This interaction dates from prehistory and the general period of the Indus civilization. In the historic period, the Achaemenid state (7th-4th cent BC), famous for its kings Darius and Xerxes, was based in Fars (Persepolis). It controlled the subcontinent up to the Indus and must have used south Iran for access to its Indian territory. The subsequent links between Iranian history and Indian history are manifold, the major political hubs being the Scythians, Parthians and the Sassanids. This takes us down to the Kushan-Gupta phase of Indian history. The story is carried forward till Nadir Shah, the 18th century Iranian king who looted Delhi.

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If we shift our focus from the Iranian south to the Iranian north, the geographical scope of links gets wider. From the side of the subcontinent one has to reach first the Herat area of Afghanistan. Herat can be reached in a number of ways from the Indian side, but from Kandahar to Herat there is an easy and straight access through the Helmand valley. Once one enters Iran from Herat, one finds a straight east-to-west route skirting both the south and north edges of the Elburz. The evidence of Indus civilization contact can be traced along this route. This was also within the central area of the Parthians, among others. Through Kermanshah one can cross the Zagros to reach northern Iraq and this gives access to the coast of Syria and the neighbouring areas. Or, one can enter Turkey through the Lake Van belt and the area to its north. There is no hindrance to the movement from here to Istanbul.

The subcontinent's economic links with Iran have also been long-lasting. The presence of the Indus civilization trading goods can be observed both along the northern and southern routes. Kirman was supplying woollen goods to Panjab and elsewhere in later periods. There was a large Indian trading colony in Isfahan under the Safavids and the Indian traders moved up to the Volga from this base.

One does not find any tangible evidence of religious interaction between Iran and

India. There is no clear Buddhist evidence from Iran. The possible reason is that Zoroastrianism was too firmly entrenched in Iran to permit the entry of Buddhism.

Afghanistan

Three ancient Indian terms – Gandhara, Vahlīka and Kamboja – denote the whole of Afghanistan and indicate the affinity of this land with India. Although taken to mean Peshawar and Jalalabad, *Gandhara* is likely to stand for the Pakhtun area of broadly south Afghanistan. *Vahlīka* basically means the Oxus valley in north Afghanistan, and *Kamboja* is likely to stand for the Badakhshan zone. The area south of the Hindukush leans more toward the subcontinent, both Kandahar and Kabul being major points of this zone. Access

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from the south to the north is provided by Hindukush passes. The Pamir plateau looks over the Wakhan corridor which maintains links with China and the northern territories of Pakistan. There is a major Indus Civilization site in the Oxus valley. This is a pattern which is also repeated by the occurrence of the Greek city of Ai Khanum in the same area. Along with the Indus valley Afghanistan was within the Achaemenid empire, and this is something which continues in the subcontinent's history till the Sikh kingdom when Ranjit Singh's kingdom included a large chunk of the Afghan territory. Politically Afghan is a kind of shatter zone with political power being shared among diverse groups.

Although it is currently fashionable to emphasize the significance of Silk Route, the route which linked China with the Mediterranean, there is a whole chain of routes linking different parts of Afghanistan and central Asia, all forming an interlinked passage towards west and central Asia including the westernmost part of China. Further, the whole of Afghanistan witnessed a significant penetration of Buddhism. Two hordes from Afghanistan, one from Begram and the other from Ilya Tepe, are among the most important hordes of traded objects in the early centuries AD.

Central Asia

Central Asia has long been considered a pivotal area of world geopolitics mainly because of the various waves of people it has seen moving both eastward and westward. As far as the subcontinent is concerned, the links are rooted in prehistory but become more

marked with the onset of the Indus Civilization when sites with Indus contact appeared in Turkmenia. The tradition continues in the historical periods with the Achaemenids, Indo-Greeks, Scythians and Parthians, and much later, the Mongols and the Mughals belong to the same historical turn of events. It was during the Kushan period that Central Asia and large parts of India including major sections of the Ganga valley got politically intertwined, leading to various manifestations in the cultural and other spheres. The development of Gandhara art, the spread of Buddhism in central Asia including the entire stretch of Xinjiang, the intensification of trade through the connecting areas, including Afghanistan, and the coming together of the entire Himalayan belt west of Ladakh are some of the major features of this period. India is likely to have played a major role in the development of city states in the Tarim basin as the archaeological ruins here have extensively displayed traces of Buddhism, Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts and visual arts including painting. It is probable that they were all Indianized states in the Tarim basin in the early centuries AD, playing a catalytic role in maintaining links with China via Dun Huang and the Hexi corridor leading to the interior of China. The traces of these states in the Tarim basin call for detailed site-by-site studies from the Indian point of view. The way these vast geographical stretches in Xinjiang have come to be buried under the impact of Uigur-speaking Islam and the Han Chinese may make many strands of the modern history of the region clear. Our understanding of the archaeology and history of Central Asia has to a great extent been impaired by our obsession with the population movements of various kinds out of this vast region, but behind all the noise raised by horses' or camels' hooves lies a quiet world of traders', pilgrims' and artists' travels enriching the world of both India and central Asia.

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Tibet

The northern boundary line of the sub-continent from Ladakh to the eastern corner of Arunachal Pradesh, which successively passes through Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, has on the other side of the border only Tibet. This is an indication of the significance of Tibet in shaping Indian geography and history. And yet, Tibet is a plateau at high altitude and possesses population centres only in the south and the southeast. The sheer fact that along the entire length of southern Tibet lies parts of India (Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh)

and the northern slices of Nepal and Bhutan makes this southern region across her border, i.e., more significant geographically and historically than the neighbour she possesses on the southeast, east and north, i.e., China. Tibet's script, literature and religion spring from contacts with India. Tibet's trade links with different areas of the sub-continent were no less significant than the trade contacts she had with east and south-east China on the one hand and the neighbours to the north (Xinjiang and Mongolia) on the other. Tibet is also a unique country in the sense that it possesses a single major ethnic group, a single majority language and a single majority religion. It has also a geographical distinctiveness, being a high altitude plateau between the Kunlun mountains and the Himalayas and thus controlling a major source of water for Asia in several directions, especially in the west (the Indus), the south (the Tsangpo or Brahmaputra) and east/ southeast (the Yangtze, Salween and Mekong).

The political entity of Tibetan state, which can be clearly noticed under Songtsan Gampo in the first half of the 7th century, seems to have been inspired by Indian influence. The creation of the Tibetan script was by Thon-mi-Sambhota who went to Kashmir to devise a syllabary of 30 consonants and 4 vowels to suit the configuration of Tibetan language. He also invented a new script on the model of the Gupta dynastic period script of northern India. It was also during this period that Buddhism was introduced on a significant scale in Tibet. The 7th century was a crucial period in the genesis of the Tibetan political state which coincided with the introduction of a new script, configuration of a new language and the introduction of Buddhism, the last heralding the translation of Buddhist texts in Tibetan and thus the beginning of a new and forceful cultural era. In the 8th century Tibet struggled with China for the control of Xinjiang. The Islamic caliphate too was then pushing in this direction. In 737 AD Tibet attacked Gilgit but the Chinese general Gao Xianzhi captured Gilgit. Between the 9th and 13th centuries AD there was a multitude of autonomous kingdoms in Tibet. The Mongol empire incorporated Tibet, and with the establishment of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in Beijing, Tibet became subjected to them. The Yuan dynasty rule lasted from about 1270 to 1354. The Mongols of this period administered Tibet through their religious representatives who were known as the Sakya lamas. They were replaced around the middle of the 14th century AD by the Phagmodrupa dynasty which continued as an autonomous power till the early 17th century, although paying a nominal homage to the Ming dynasty of China. The succeeding Ganden Phodrang dynasty continued until 1720 AD when the Manchurian Qing dynasty came to power in China, also bringing Tibet under its influence. The Qing influence in Tibet waned towards the end of the 18th century when Nepal unsuccessfully invaded Tibet. The defeat of the invading force of Nepal in 1792 may

have increased the power of the Qing dynasty but this dynasty became weak in the early part of the 19th century.

A major Buddhist philosopher invited by Tibet was Padmasambhava who was born in Swat (ancient *Uddiyana*) and subsequently attained the status of 'a second Buddha' in the Buddhist tradition of the Himalayas including Nepal and Bhutan. Padmasambhava's name is also associated with the introduction of Tantric Buddhism in Tibet. One must note that through Tantric Buddhism Tibet became part of a wider Buddhist world stretching as far north as Mongolia and as far south as Bengal and Bihar in east India. Many iconographic aspects of deities from eastern India were introduced in Tibet. Padmasambhava himself has many iconographic forms and religious imageries in Tibetan art. These iconographic aspects such as *Yab-Yum* figures and their elaborations and variations (cf. *Yamantaka*) provide the core elements of the worship of Buddhist deities in the Himalaya belt. Tibetan Buddhist art shows a huge corpus of objects which are all entwined with the Buddhist principles and beliefs in the Himalayan belt and eastern India.

The second major Buddhist philosopher invited to Tibet in the mid-8th century was Santarakshita who possibly came from Nalanda and played an important role in the translation of Buddhist texts in Tibetan. His own writings extensively survive only in Tibetan translations. The third Buddhist philosopher who played a stirring role in the dissemination of Buddhist ideas in Tibet was *Atisa Dipamkara Srijnana* (982-1054). Dipamkara went to Tibet when he was the abbot of the famous Vikramasila monastery. Tibet's religious interaction with India, especially eastern India, forms a very significant chapter in the religious history of both regions. The tenth century Tabo and Alchi monasteries of Himachal Pradesh are of Tibetan inspiration. What we see in the case of Tibet in a very distinctive way also happened alongside the dissemination of Buddhism in the vast borderlands areas in Afghanistan, central Asia and Xinjiang. Mongolian Buddhism is also a contribution of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tibet's economic interaction with the sub-continent was equally deep and seminal. The famous 'Tea and Horse Road' from China brought tea to Tibet and took away Tibetan horses. This network also extended to Myanmar, Nepal and India. Tibetan horses used to be imported to India in the historic periods and the horses with which the Bhutanese and Tibetan traders came down to Udalgiri fair in Bhutan and Hajo fair in Assam were Tibetan horses. The Bhutanese traders played an important role in the overall Tibetan trade with east India. According to the testimony of McCosh (1837), the Ahom kings of Assam used to send presents to Lhasa in the form of annually sent caravans of trade, and this is something like

what was current in the maintenance of trade links between Ladakh and Lhasa. This does not mean that Tibet had exacted such annual presents as political tribute. More correctly, it was a ceremonial exchange of gifts which were commercially useful to both parties. What we find interesting is that through Bhutanese traders Tibet was sending goods, including *Tangun* horses, as far south as Rangpur. East India's economic interaction with Tibet is too deep-rooted to be ignored. Kalimpong which is easily accessible from Nathu La at the border of Tibet was a major entrepot of India-Tibet commerce.

The presence of Newari traders of Nepal in Lhasa since the 7th century and the importance which they have always claimed in the life of Tibet is a good indication of how closely Nepal and Tibet interacted in the economic field. The Newari craftsmen produced

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images and paintings and played an important role in the construction of such iconic structures as Jokhang temple of Lhasa which was initially set up by Songsten Gampo and is the holiest shrine of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Mustang or the Kali Gandaki route at the extreme northwest of Nepal was an important route to Tibet. An interesting aspect of this route is the occurrence of about 3000 petroglyphs along it. There are also superb 11th century paintings in a complex of caves in this area. One gathers that the route through Mustang, which seems to have been at its peak in the 11th century and later, had its links in India as far deep in the Gangetic plain as Banaras and Mirzapur. West of Nepal, Uttarakhand was another hub of commerce with Tibet. G W Trall (1832) listed that in the modern Uttarakhand sector Tibetans brought down coarse shawls and woollens, silks of indifferent quality, dry fruits, borax, ponies, yak-tails, etc. The Indian traders sent textiles, matchlocks, sugar, brass pots, beads, etc. Borax was an important item in the gold-processing industry. This trade was conducted through such passes as Lipu Lekh, Niti and Mana.

Trade with Tibet was conducted in Himachal Pradesh through Shipki and Kauriya passes. The volume of trade which was carried here on small-sized ponies and sheep was restricted. Rampur Bushire was an important hub of Indo-Tibetan commerce in Himachal Pradesh. Borax, salt and wool came from Tibet, with rice, wheat and oil going the other way. The ceremonial exchange of gifts (and thus trade) between Ladakh and Tibet under the treaty of Tingmosgang (1684) once in every three years brought Tibetan tea, silk and shawl woollens from Tibet and sent to Tibet saffron, sugar, silver ingots and great quantities of dried apricots. On the Tibetan side the main centre was Gartok. There was a wide belt

on the Indian side, covering Ladakh, Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, with the major marts of Panjab including Amritsar and Hoshiarpur in the background.

Myanmar

If Tibet's close ideological, cultural and commercial relations with the sub-continent puts her in a category apart, the same may be said about Myanmar whose relationships with the sub-continent are unambiguous and cover a large ground. From the Brahmaputra valley to the Shan plateau the route was smooth through the Hookong valley and from Manipur one has no trouble in negotiating the Irrawaddy valley up to Mandalay. Still easier is India's Myanmarese connection through the Chittagong coast which is easy of access from the Padma-Meghna valley and offers smooth overland access across the Naf river to the coastal tract of Arakan. This coastal tract was linked both to the upper and lower Irrawaddy valley across the gaps in the Arakan hills. From Chittagong there has also been easy coastal traffic with Arakan. The question is not yet decided how far was Myanmar within the purview of maritime traffic from the Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Orissa and Bengal coasts. The theory of the influence of the Pallava dynastic style script on the Pyu script of Myanmar raises the issue of such maritime links. So does the existence of excavated stupas at places like Beikthano with Andhra-like *ayaga* projections. It has also been thought that ships for the Myanmarese coast used to set sail from the Godavari estuary in easternmost Andhra. There is no problem with these postulates. However, the problem is whether we have visible evidence of such maritime links between Indian east coast and the west coast of Myanmar. The overland links are very feasible between these two areas, and our personal assumption is that all the overland routes of access from Assam, Manipur and Chittagong coast played a major role in maintaining India-Myanmar relations and possibly overshadowed the significance of their maritime links.

The most serious influence in the genesis of historic urban growth in Myanmar, both in the Irrawaddy valley and Arakan, is Indian

A route came from Yunnan and went down first to Bhamo and then to the Irrawaddy. From Bhamo this route crossed into the Brahmaputra valley through the Hookong valley, and also into Manipur by moving further in the interior of Myanmar. Various pieces of evidence related to this route point to its existence from the early historic period onward but to give the status of a 'southern silk route' is uncalled for. The most serious influence in the genesis of historic urban growth in Myanmar, both in the Irrawaddy valley and Arakan, is Indian. The distinctive features of Myanmarese early cities notwithstanding, one cannot

ignore the fact that they are inspired by the early model of urban centres in India. No other model was likely to include the provision of 'palace', Buddhist stupas and monasteries within the urban walls. The occurrence of Brahmi script and the prevalence of *Srivatsa* motif on coins in the Myanmarese archaeological complex of this period conclusively puts an authentic Indian stamp on the excavated historic settlements of Myanmar. Iconography as revealed by the sculptures of numerous Hindu and Buddhist deities which have been found in different historical phases in Myanmar link Myanmar's religious ideology irrevocably to the sub-continent. The basic sculptural style remains Indian. The sculptural remains from Dhanyawadi and Wethali in Arakan strongly suggest that the sculptors and architects involved were likely to be Indians. Pagan was at the peak of its political, economic and cultural development in the 11th-12th centuries and deeply inspired by the Indian temple-building styles, among others. Examples of Hindu and Buddhist iconography on Indian models are too many to be counted in Pagan.

In the post-Gupta period Arakan was the centre of the Harikela kingdom which incorporated the Padma-Meghna delta. Arakan's role in the cultural life of eastern India continued down to the 14th century AD when the Arakanese Muslim kings encouraged the development of Bengali literature in their courts.

The other political groups of Myanmar which closely interacted with the Indian northeast included the Ahoms who migrated to the Brahmaputra valley through the Hookong valley and carved out and maintained a large kingdom on both banks of the Brahmaputra. There was fresh invasion from the Myanmarese side in 1824-26 and the treaty of Yandabo (1826) was concluded with the British after the defeat of the Myanmarese forces.

This cursory outline of India's interactions with the areas beyond her land borders suggests a picture of great historical complexity.

Observations on Prof. Chakrabarti's Study

The India-China Frontier

Abanti Bhattacharya

Dilip K. Chakrabarti's book, 'The Borderlands and Boundaries of the Indian Subcontinent' is a first of its kind. The sheer content of the book, with its massive data and information on India's borderlands from Baluchistan to the Patkai Range and Arakan Yoma, is not just fascinating but it is of enormous significance towards gaining an accurate perspective on India's historical and geographical reach beyond the known borders. Indeed, his book throws a fresh light on India's notion of territoriality in the historical past and allows to gain a nuanced understanding of the idea of India.

The most fascinating part of the book is the last sentence and which apparently is also the crux of this prodigious oeuvre. To quote,

"...all the overland 'foreign invasions' in Indian History from the Achaemenids to the Mughals emanated from the borderlands of the subcontinent and one cannot thus be sure of the extent to which they were 'foreign'" (215).

Chakrabarti essentially drives the point home that historically India's borderlands were a part of Indic zone, and thus, not foreign. Here, an interesting comparison may be made with the Chinese notions of borderlands. In Chinese history, out of the ten major dynasties ruling over imperial China, five of them were foreign or non-Han dynasties who came from the borderlands. This has prompted the post-1949 People's Republic of China to claim the periphery or the borderlands as Chinese territory. In other words, present China's claim on the borderlands- Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet- is based on the influence exercised by foreign dynasties over these areas along with their rule over China. Using that logic India would have rightful claim on its borderlands which stretched from Baluchistan to the

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Arakan Yoma, which Dilip Chakrabarti calls as the “traditional Indian geo-political orbit” (p. xviii). Yet, the post-Independence Indian government did not make such a claim.

One reason of course is the British colonial rule that bequeathed India a fragmented civilizational nation and an ill-defined territorial boundary. The other reason, however, is the role of borderlands in fashioning country’s strategic culture. In China’s case, its imperial history is dotted with foreign or so called ‘barbarian’ invasions right from setting up of the first imperial dynasty, the Qin to the last one, the Qing. China confronted incessant invasions from the north and northwest that engendered a psyche of vulnerability and this sense of vulnerability has got embedded in its strategic culture and foreign policy making. From the fashioning of Han model of frontier development to the building of the Great Wall in the 2nd century BCE, Chinese history is a saga of a constant tussle between vulnerability and stability. And this preponderance of the periphery pervades through the present Xi Jinping’s government as well, when his leadership has identified periphery strategy as the number one foreign policy of China. Quite predictably thus, a conference on periphery (24-25 October 2013) came right after the launching of Silk Road Economic Belt (7 September 2013) and Maritime Silk Road (3rd October 2013).

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In the case of Indian History, there is no narrative on the frontier, akin to Frederick J. Turner’s ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, published in 1893, or the Qing’s court’s series of reformist writings in the 1890s urging for direct control over the borderlands. Also, there is no sense of vulnerability pervading the Indian psyche and hence no defensive Great Wall in India. Although historically, most invaders entered through the narrow Khyber Pass, the gigantic Himalayan mountains tended to shield the core Indo-Gangetic plains, thus engendering a sense of insularity rather than vulnerability. Beyond the Vindhyas, seas and oceans surround the subcontinent, which further buttressed the sense of insularity.

In the post-independent era, the British conception of frontier policy underscored in the creation of buffer zones sought to offer a protective shield to the Indian subcontinent. In effect, historically, India’s borderlands did not connote a zone of violence, chaos and turmoil. Unlike in China where borderlands were regarded as strategic frontiers, in India borderlands were at best cultural frontiers. This perception of borderlands as cultural frontiers permeated the post-Independence era state building process in India. As such, India did not prioritise territorialising its borderlands. Till this day, it does not claim Mount

Kailash as historically Indian territory, and Indians are happy to apply for Chinese visas for annual pilgrimage to the abode of Lord Shiva. Also, it was only when the Chinese army occupied Tibet in 1950 that Prime Minister Nehru's government woke up to the border threat and signed up friendship treaties with Bhutan (1949) and Nepal (1950), and turning Sikkim into a protectorate in 1950. Geography has played its own role in shaping India's strategic culture, and this in turn, has influenced its state-building process as well.

Implications for Territorial Dispute with China

A second important aspect that comes out very prominently in Dilip Chakrabarti's book is the disputed territorial issue between India and China. Four such instances can be highlighted here to argue that we need to revisit the history issue in our vexed border dispute with the Chinese. On the Aksai Chin issue, he argues that the Treaty of Chusul of 1842 was about the boundary of Ladakh and Tibet. The text of the treaty refers to the "fixed boundaries of Ladakh and its surroundings as fixed from ancient times" (p. 214). Since this boundary was fixed from ancient times, "there was no effort to mark this boundary on map" (p.156). This treaty, he says, "gave India her clearest mandate of territorial possessions from Ladakh towards Tibet and towards the Kunlun beyond the Karakoram, which used to be well reflected in the traditional trade routes between Leh, Yarkand, Khotan and also between Leh and Lhasa (p. 156). On the same page he argues:

"that this mandate was allowed to wither away due to the intransigence of both the British and the post-1947 Indian administration is a telling commentary on how the borders call for clear appraisals and demarcations in the nations' own interest." (p.156)

On Mansarovar and the Mount Kailash, Chakrabarti mentions that, a "pivotal point of Hindu mythology was located in the Zhanzhang region, thus suggesting an early link between India and this part of Tibet" (p. 201). It may be pointed out here that the Chinese lay claim on Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh) on the basis of the birth of the 6th Dalai Lama. Such a claim is doubly faulty because Chinese claims are based on first its fallacious and illegal claim on Tibet itself. And second, if historical fact is marshalled to make territorial claims then, India's claim should go up to Xinjiang, where there are definite Indian imprints, as Chakrabarti's book has clearly demonstrated. In fact, archaeological evidences and the ruins in Xinjiang indicate an "Indian control of Khotan as early as the third century BCE" (p. 210). And he concludes that "from all conceivable points of view- political, commercial and religious- the land between the Oxus and the Jaxartes and the Tarim Basin, i.e. most of Central Asia should be included in the category of 'Indian borderlands'" (p. 210).

On the Tibet issue, he categorically states that Tibet was never under the Chinese control since both Tibet and China were under the Mongols between 1240 and 1354 and between 1279 and 1368 respectively. He argues, “the fact that the Mongols were the masters of both Tibet and China does not make Tibet an integral part of China” (p. 158). In fact, he makes a case for Tibet as culturally closer to India, than to China.

To quote, “culturally, Tibet with its religion, religious iconography, script and much of its religious literature derived from India is more logically a part of Indian, not Chinese, civilizational sphere” (p. 158).

On the McMahon Line, he says that geographically, not only did the McMahon Line separate Tibet from Arunachal Pradesh, but archeologically too, “the province has yielded an extensive series of 10th -12th sculptures of Hindu deities from place such as Malinithan and has at least one major centre of Hindu pilgrimage called Brahma Kund in the valley of the Lohit River” (p. 158). This evidence clearly squashes any Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh.

Trade Routes and Silk Route

A third significant aspect of his book is related to the Silk Route. Chakrabarti throws light on the problems in modern literature that has virtually seen the entire network of ancient trade in Asia as being associated with China and her silk. Though development of the Silk Route is not his main concern in his book, he successfully demonstrates the network of trade routes in Asia linking the subcontinent and clearly establishes the Silk Route, unlike the current Belt and Road Initiative, as not a Chinese route but essentially a private trade route. In this regard, he says, “the concept of Silk Road is the product of Western scholarship which found in it the reflection of Rome’s civilizing influence reaching as far east as the shores of the Pacific” (p. 99). Further illuminating on the character of the Silk Road, he says, “to assign the importance of the Mediterranean -China linkage only to the fact of this linkage without adequately harping on the ramifications of the many subsidiary linkages which places like India maintained with it, cannot always be the product of a true historical imagination” (p. 100). More categorically, he states that “the main historical factor beyond Xuanzang’s perilous journey was not any imaginary ‘Silk Road’ but the fact of Buddhism itself” (p. 100). In other words, by highlighting the importance of Buddhism, he demonstrates the significant role that India had in shaping the Silk Route. More tellingly, he suggests, “the sites or the city-states of which they were a part at the edges of the

Taklamakan desert, were much like the Indianized states of South-East Asia” (p. 100). In effect, he basically argues that India had political imprints in Central Asia, just like it had in Southeast Asia. He establishes that “the story of Silk Routes is also a story of the boundaries and frontiers of the subcontinent” (p. 11).

The fourth striking aspect of the book is related to his observations on the British demarcation of borders of the subcontinent. He highlights how basic geographical and historical elements guided the formation of British Indian borderlands from Baluchistan to Arakan Yoma. In this regard one may recall George K. Tanham’s essay on India’s Strategic Thought published in 1992 where he suggests the British Raj as one of the factors influencing India’s strategic thinking. In particular, Tanham mentions the British notion of creating buffer zones. Quoting Tanham, “the British first sought to establish a buffer system as far out from India as possible. This meant keeping Afghanistan and Iran friendly and cut of the Russian sphere of influence.” Afghanistan and Iran were rightly identified as buffers zones to resist the Russian Empire. The point to note here is that although the idea of buffer is owed to the British, nevertheless their formulation is based on the existing geographical and historical realities. The buffer zones were essentially India’s historical borderlands which Professor Chakrabarti highlights in his path-breaking study.

Another related point that Chakrabarti mentions is about the British boundary demarcation that was not randomly specified. He says the texts of the treaties suggest that “the principle of natural boundary line based on particulars rivers or mountain ranges was followed in all cases” (p. 212). This is certainly true in the case of McMahon Line where the crest of the Himalayas was identified as the dividing line between British India and Tibet. However, one should also take note of the fact that the British power had delineated the borders in complete disregard for ethnic composition of a region. This is particularly evident in the 1893 Durand Line drawn up by the British to secure the Khyber Pass and firm up the border between Afghanistan and British India. The Durand Line divided the Pashtun tribal region, with the southern half of the tribal region becoming part of British India, and the northern half becoming part of Afghanistan. This arbitrary ethnic division has become one of the fundamental reasons for the present conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Study of History

Finally, a crucial aspect that comes up in his book is the significance of studying history. Using historical geography approach, his book provides a detailed picture of territoriality of ancient India. While this allows us to have a clear understanding of the extent of India’s influence and reach, it also helps to put our historical record straight. In

other words, his book questions the dominant liberal-left perspectives on Indian History. For past seventy years or so, our understanding of history has been shaped by liberal-left perspectives that viewed history from the premise of contestation and conflict. It dwarfed India's past achievements and shied away from celebrating its richness. Since left-liberal perspectives are borrowed lenses from the West and are not indigenous to India, our understanding of Indian past has got distorted in the process. And since the concerns of Eurocentric constructs were to build grand historical theories, close attention and priority were never given to empirical research and no serious attempt was made to look at the sources of India's past.

No nation can acquire a grand global status on a borrowed ideology. History engenders a sense of identity to a nation. And if that history is distorted and denigrated, no nation can aspire to become a great power. India needs to redeem its true historical identity. And in doing so, resurrecting the true history of India is a must. In this regard, India might take a leaf out of Chinese experience. The post-1990s is a period of China's rise. This period coincided with the rise of Chinese nationalism as well. In fact, an important aspect of Chinese nationalism has been to go back to the roots underscored in the Guoxue studies. History learning in China thus became salient for all students in school and at graduate level. In India too, history books need to be freed from their Eurocentric biases. And research should be conducted by going back to the sources of ancient history. In this regard, Dilip Chakrabarti's book does a yeomen service by rediscovering India's past history through archaeological evidences and geographical survey, and thereby resurrecting India's past glory and authenticating the idea of India.

Observations -2

India's Central Asian Borderlands

K. Warikoo

Prof. Dilip Chakrabarti has undertaken a stupendous task in studying and recording the borderlands and boundaries of the Sub-continent right from the Hindu Kush and Karakoram through Chitral, Gilgit, Hunza, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh up to the Arakan Hills in Myanmar. This study delves into the geographical, historical, religious and economic interaction and complexities of the borderlands, which have been a zone of interaction through history. Whereas the British took interest in exploring, mapping and demarcating the borderlands in Iran and Afghanistan, northern frontiers did not receive attention due to the British priority of appeasing China to keep Russians at bay. Prof. Chakrabarti draws attention to the importance of Iran and the route from Zabul and Zahidan to Mshed, which has now assumed importance due to the connectivity between Afghanistan and Central Asia through Chabahar port of Iran. Mention has been made of the sway of Hindu Shahis of Kabul. I may point out here that a Shiva temple existed on a hill in Kabul. It is still in the memory of the people of Kabul who call it as Joy-i-Sheer (milky stream). Few years ago I was in Kabul for about a week and from a distance I could feel some sacredness about this hill. I could not resist asking Dr. Mirwaiz Balkhi (now Education Minister in Afghanistan) about it, and he confirmed it to be the site of an old Shiva temple where milk offered by devotes flowed in a stream.

Prof. Chakrabarti rightly points to the Wakhan corridor as the dividing line between Tajikistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. I have travelled up to Langar- the last village of Wakhan Corridor (coming from Kulyab, Khorog, Ishkashim, Julandi etc.) and have seen myself Gilgit -- just 14 kms across the Wakhan corridor from that point. One needs to imagine the catastrophic implications of the loss of Gilgit-Baltistan to India in 1947-48 in geopolitical and strategic terms. We not only lost a vantage position at this frontier, but we have been

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deprived of the direct overland access to Central Asia through Wakhan and Tajikistan. This has marginalised India's role and position in Central Asia quite substantially.

Prof. Chakrabarti has arrayed a wealth of archeological and historical evidence to demonstrate the closeness of India-Central Asia interaction both in cultural, artistic and economic realms. He has detailed the passes on the Hindu Kush and routes from Ladakh to Tibet and Xinjiang. Chapter 4 outlines the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and points to the existence of several Buddhist sites in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Here it is pertinent to point out that Dunhuang caves in China have been properly maintained and studied, attracting adequate international attention. So much so 9 million tourists visited Dunhuang caves in the year 2018. But the remnants of Buddhist sites in Central Asia are in a shambles and cry for attention. Though we in India are never tired of stating the close and rich historical-cultural ties with Central Asia, we have not initiated any practical steps for the preservation and maintenance of such evidence of Indian imprint in Central Asia. Tamgaly Tas in Kazakhstan, ruins of a Buddhist stupa and two Kushan forts in Tajik Badakhshan, Buddhist sites in the Chu valley-Ak Beshim, Krasnaya Rechka, Balashagun, etc., call for urgent attention. In fact tractors ply over the main Buddhist heritage site lying underground in Balashgun in Kyrgyzstan. We spend huge sums annually on the functioning of Indian Cultural Centres in Central Asia, but we have not thought of erecting a fibre glass cover at Tamgaly Tass and other Buddhist sites, not to speak of the restoration of the Kushan forts in Tajik Badakhshan.

the remnants of Buddhist sites in Central Asia are in a shambles and cry for attention.

Boundary from Ladakh to Arunahal Pradesh, which is overlooked by Tibet, has been dealt with in detail in Part II of the book. Prof. Chakrabarti is right in saying that Tibet has been traditionally linked more to Indian Himalaya through trade, Buddhist connection and people to people contacts, rather than to China. In fact Chinese tea, etc., reached Tibet via Kashgar-Yarkand-Leh-Gartok-Lhasa route, besides from the Yunnan-Sichuan route. The Treaty of Tingmosgang signed in 1684 "fixed the border at Lhari stream, flowing into the Indus south-west of Demchok"¹. Ladakh was persuaded to cede to Lhasa the territory of West Tibet as "an offering to the religion of Buddha" and the revenue of this territory was to be used "to meet the expenses of the sacrificial lambs and the reading of prayers at Lhasa"². A treaty was concluded between the Tibetans and the Dogras at Leh on 17 September 1842, under which the Tibetans accepted the Dogras as the legitimate authority in Ladakh and the 'old established frontiers' were reaffirmed.

The British Indian government sent two commissioners Alexander Cunningham and Vans Agnew to Ladakh in August 1846 to “ascertain the ancient boundaries between Ladakh and Tibet and to lay down the boundary between the newly acquired British possessions in the Hills and Gulab Singh’s territory”.³ Though the British sought cooperation of the Tibetan and Chinese officials to the joint demarcation of the Ladakh-Tibet border, both the Chinese and Tibetans evaded the issue, as they did not want to give access to the British for trade in Tibet. When the British commissioners arrived at the border at the end of August 1846, there were no Chinese officials. They were also met with the hostility of the Tibetans. In fact the Chinese Viceroy at Canton, Key-ing wrote to the British Plenipotentiary at Hong Kong clearly stating that “a liberalised Chinese trade policy in Tibet would violate the Treaties of Nanking, which gave the British special rights on five Chinese ports.”⁴ As

China right from Han times used the ancient Silk Road to reach out to Persia, Central Asian Khanates, etc., more for political than economic considerations.

regards the border issue, Key-ing stated that “the borders of these territories have been sufficiently and distinctly fixed so that it will be best to adhere to this ancient arrangement”.⁵ Cunningham confirms that “with Rudok on the east there has been a long peace. The boundary is well defined by piles of stones, which were set up after the last expulsion of the Skopo or Mongol hordes in 1687 AD.”⁶ Cunningham adds that “a large stone was then set

up as a permanent boundary between the two countries, the line of demarcation being drawn from the village of Dechong (Demchok) to the hill of Karbones.”⁷ So the point is, has post-independent India taken any steps to protect, maintain and monitor the presence or shifting of these stones as boundary markers.

Prof. Chakrabarti has examined in detail the geographical, historical, economic and religious interactions between Indian bordering areas and geographical zones lying outside. It is relevant to point out here that China right from Han times used the ancient Silk Road to reach out to Persia, Central Asian Khanates, etc., more for political than economic considerations. China used trade and even subsidies on trade as a means to extend their diplomatic and geopolitical influence in the outlying territories. In contemporary times, China has used this concept to promote the old Silk Road, pursued a policy of constructing the Eurasian Land-bridge, followed it up with One Belt One Road (OBOR) (2013-16), and has focused on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) 2016 onwards. Thus, China has successfully executed its plan of extending economic and political influence across Central, South and West Asia and even beyond in Europe and Africa.

Policy Implications of the Study

Implications of the study by Prof. Chakrabarti need to be followed up by taking concrete steps, keeping in view the current and upcoming challenges to our sovereignty on our borders in the north and east. Our borderlands are under great stress due to open challenges to our sovereignty in Kashmir by Pakistan and the Islamist separatists, and Chinese position on our northern and north-eastern frontiers. Whereas political goodwill and tranquility are essential for peaceful boundaries, harmony and cross-border cooperation, settlement of borders is necessary to resolve the border disputes. Borders need to be formally agreed, well documented, surveyed and recorded, demarcated, maintained and well managed. Boundary markers/monuments have to be erected, maintained and borders monitored.

The symbolic characteristics of territory are used as a means of consolidating the link between national identity and a specific space. Sadly, even the great and ancient monuments of Indian civilisation dotting the entire Valley of Kashmir have been obliterated or damaged by Islamic extremists with a clear objective of erasing the concrete historical-cultural evidence of Indian civilisational presence in Kashmir. Over 200 old temples have been destroyed and scores of old Sufi shrines/dargahs have been burnt down. Here one may point out that the High Court of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in one of its judgements had asked the government there to take steps to preserve and maintain the ruins of ancient Sharda temple in Neelum Valley, Muzaffarabad. Indian institutions, particularly the Archeological Survey of India have not done their job of forging the territory–identity bond using the abundant tools of archaeology and history available. Instead the process of territorial alienation from the Indian mainstream has been fostered through text books, revised /doctored history writing. One can undertake/ organize field trips to places of historical-cultural significance. What we find is that tour operators of Kashmir have changed their travel itineraries for foreign and even Indian tourists, describing Shankracharya temple as Takht-i-Suleman, Hari Parbat as Koh-i- Maran, ancient city of Srinagar (founded by emperor Ashoka) as Shahr-e-Khas. Similarly the battle sites and memorials of martyrs need attention. Maqbool Sherwani was killed by Pak raiders at the age of 19 years in Baramulla on 7 November 1947, as he delayed the advance of Pak troops to Srinagar by leading them astray. Crucifixion of Sherwani is recorded in a small plaque in Baramulla Cantonment. Similar is the case with Brigadier Usman, who was killed in July 1948 in Nowshera while fighting Pak troops. Both Sherwani and Usman are rare symbols of heroism, patriotism and of India's inclusive secularism. So concrete steps need to be taken to promote territorial symbolism that plays an important part in the construction of national identity and consolidation of frontiers.

Endnotes

1. Dorothy Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*. London, Barrie & Rockliffe, 1969. p 20.
2. A.H. Francke, *Ladakh : The Mysterious Land* (Reprint, Delhi, 1978), p. 113.
3. *Ibid.* p 62.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Alexander Cunningham, *Ladakh*. London, 1854. p 261.
7. *Ibid.* pp 328-29.