

Book Review

Comparing India and China, but not without Western biases

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What China and India Once Were: The Pasts That May Shape The Global Future
Edited by Sheldon Pollock and Benjamin Elman,
New York, Columbia University, 2018

In the contemporary era, while there is the rise of a powerful China that is literally challenging the West, particularly the US, there is also a rise of India. The editors of this volume, Sheldon Pollock and Benjamin Elman, who are well-known scholars in their own right, believe that this parallel rise of the two Asian giants would shape the future world order. Therefore, knowing India and China from a comparative perspective becomes all the more significant. This significance of 'knowing' can be gauged from the aim of preparing this book as delineated by the editors in the opening pages. It says that the book aims "to explore the nature of Asian pasts so as to get a better grasp of Asian presents" (p. 2). This reminds us how history is essential to any understanding of foreign policy of a country. This was iterated in 1948, by none other than John K Fairbank, the father of American Sinology. Following his footsteps, Pollock and Elman also seek to compare the non-European countries through the prism of history. But they aim to do so by distancing themselves from the Fairbankian practice of painting all past Asian societies with the same homogenizing brush of the 'modernization theory'. The editors thus adopt a novel approach of comparative study by avoiding Western prejudices and stereotypes that had informed the colonial comparative studies.

Comparing India and China

Comparative works on India and China are very few and far between. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi's *India and China: A Thousand years of Cultural Relations* (1951), and *India and China: Interactions through Buddhism and Diplomacy—A collection of essays by Prof.*

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Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (compiled by Wang and Sen, 2011) remain the most distinctive oeuvres from the earlier period. However, most earlier works were confined to exploring civilizational linkages or realpolitik competition between the two countries. For instance, Madhavi Thampi (ed.) *India and China in the Colonial World* (2005) looks at the multi-dimensional interaction between the two countries in the colonial period. In a similar vein, Tan Chung's *Himalaya Calling: The Origins of China and India* (2015) studies the dynamics of the two Asian giants from the geo-civilizational paradigm of the Himalayan sphere. Again, John Garver's *Protracted Contest* (2001) remains by far the primary text for studying conflict and competition between India and China in the contemporary era. However, breaking from the monotony of binaries, Tansen Sen's *India, China and the World* (2018) studies the mutual relations of the two countries in the context of global changes and observes convergent developments in the two societies. Continuing with this genre of connected history approach, which is in vogue today, Prasenjit Duara and Elizabeth J. Perry study the differences and similarities in state-society relations of the two Asian countries in *Beyond Regimes: China and India Compared* (2018).

Moving away from the connected history approach, the book under review that was also published in 2018, appropriates a truly comparative historical perspective. The significance of the book lies in the fact that it takes into consideration the period from 1500 to 1800, when both the countries were under foreign imperial rulers of the Mughals in India and the Manchus in China and both confronted and ultimately succumbed to the pressures of Western imperialism. In each chapter, noted scholars of India and China have paired up to explore ecology, polity, gender relations, religion, historiography, literature, art and painting, science and technology and thus have, for the first time, presented a truly comparative study of the two Asian giants. As noted by the editors, this book is mainly concerned with "what the Chinese and the Indians did with a given political, social, or cultural form, not where those forms may have originated" (p.11). Further, this book claims to be different by offering a "direct comparison" between India and China, avoiding references to Western standards and stereotypes and thereby, in the editors' words, being "decentered from the West" (p.12).

However, the book begins with the depiction of an image of India troubled by Hindu-Muslim violence—a familiar picture in the West. In the same breath, it illustrates a positive image of China which is seen as a country that has left no corners of the Western world unindated with its manufactured goods. The choice of the negative image for India begs the question: could the authors not have juxtaposed the same with an image of China that routinely persecutes its Tibetan and Uighur minorities? This tells us rather about the larger issue of geopolitical purpose shaping Western scholarship and motivating their differential

perception of India and China. That is to say, the tasks of 'knowing' about India and China are largely driven by power and interests of the dominant nations, varying across time and space, and it is this fact which has characterised the contours of much of Western historical studies.

Society and Culture in India and China

The book is divided into three parts (without thematic titles). Although the categorization of essays under each part follows no apparent logic, the essays by themselves are interesting and almost leave no aspects of human society unaddressed. In fact, the lead essay, 'Life and Energy' by Guha and Pomeranz deals with ecology and environment, a subject which has acquired critical global interest in the present era. The essay shows how both countries were energy-sparing and agriculture-based economies and yet responded differently to the ecological factors of water and food, forest and domesticated animals and to the issues of migration and trade. The essay by Crossley and Eaton is equally insightful noting how the Mughals and the Qing, who, although were conquest dynasties and shared some similar inheritance from the Mongol empires, established different methods of building ideologically plural rulership. But interestingly, as the authors note, both their rulerships and strategies were ultimately shaped by the exigencies of overland conquest. The essay titled 'Gender Systems' shows strikingly similar family systems in India and China despite different religious beliefs and political configurations of the two countries. The essay on 'Relating the Past' is quite illuminating, for it rectifies (albeit to a lesser extent) the long-held misconception in the West about India lacking a historical consciousness. It notes that although history did not emerge as "a distinct category of fact-based study or writing, yet Indians did not lack historical imagination... (T)he literati who recorded the past often gave historical events a literary form, weaving together fact and fiction, thereby revealing a conception of history and the writing of history—that is, a historiographical vision—very different from that embraced in either China or the West" (p. 127). Noting similarities of purpose in history writing, the essay points out that history had cosmological significance and ritual importance in both the societies. However, unlike in India, historiography was integral to the working of the Chinese state and served primarily to promote legitimacy of the new dynasties. The essay on literature quite fascinatingly observes that in China the script used was same but everywhere the language was spoken differently, while in India, Sanskrit "was spoken everywhere more or less similarly ...but it was read everywhere in different scripts" (p. 194). Again, in China, poetry could not be understood without a historical apparatus that determined when and where it was written. But in India, poetry could not be understood with a historical apparatus as it was meant "to express what was beyond time and place" (p. 194). The essay on Big Science, while noting

comparable developments in both the countries, also notes how “political institutions and social organizations supported the sciences in different ways” (p. 228). Likewise, the essay on Art and Vision draws interesting differences between Indian and Chinese paintings with the former focused on figural painting and the latter on landscape painting. Furthermore, while line drawing predominated Indian art, haze prevailed in China.

Religion in India and China

The chapter on religion draws similarities between India and China in terms of each having great religious influences on Southeast Asia and East Asia, but also notes that the very use of the category ‘religion’ for India and China is problematic. Though the conclusion of the essay notes that there is no word as religion in both the countries, it does not explore why this is so. It says, “there are numerous words that function as “religion” in different contexts, and not one can be said to clearly define religion in the European-Christian sense of the word” (p. 262). The chapter misses out on the fundamental difference between India and China regarding their metaphysical orientations, with the former rooted in the ‘other-worldly’ philosophical thoughts and the latter in the ‘this-worldly’. This difference has engendered different spiritual experiences for the two countries and allowed distinct philosophical traditions to take root. For instance, in China, the preeminent need for order and harmony led to a greater emphasis on correct performance of rituals that helped to maintain cosmological balance between heaven, earth and humanity. On the contrary, in India, the emphasis on the law of *karma* stressed on individual salvation, not of the collective. Yet, in both the countries, there was no such thing as ‘religion’ until the advent of the West. In China, there was no distinction between sacred and profane or divine and ordinary, rather everything was understood in the context of their proper place in the cosmos. In the context of India, the word ‘*dharma*’ does not equate with religion—a point that is also noted by Dipesh Chakrabarty in the afterword of the volume. In fact, the Western intervention caused a major distortion by suffixing ‘-ism’ to the word Hindu that had ominous political and social consequences. By suffixing ‘-ism’, it erroneously conflated the Hindu *dharma* with the Abrahamic religions and thereby dangerously distorted the very essence of being a Hindu. An ‘-ism’ essentially represents a dogma and all dogmas have the characteristic of othering out and are thus intrinsically divisive and violent. Notably, ‘-ism’ emerged in the West around the sixteenth century as mainly heresies. Therefore, suffixing -ism has not only distorted the meaning of being a Hindu, but also warped the perception of India. So, it is necessary, as Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly insists, to dwell on the histories of India and China “on their own terms” and “as it were” (p. 325).

Concluding Remarks

In writing this remarkably colossal volume, the authors aimed to achieve two major objectives. One, to explore the past to better understand the present and two, to avoid all facile explanatory accounts “that usually winds up homogenizing all past societies” (p. 2). But on both counts, they have failed. None of the essays shows how the past is contingent on the present. However, more ironical is the fact that none of the authors could steer clear of presenting an undistorted view of the non-Western societies since they could not avoid appropriating Western categories of religion, history, poetry, state and so on, that have acquired analytical status and are symbols of modernity, a point also noted by Dipesh Chakrabarty in the afterword of the book. More intriguingly, Chakrabarty argues that “modernity and its categories are never just an imposition by imperialists. The desire to be modern that we see among Chinese intellectuals, Japanese intellectuals, or Indian intellectuals often involved gestures of rejection of aspects of their own pasts” (p. 337). This suggests that Indian intellectuals are partly to blame for misrepresenting and distorting the history of India owing to their imitation of modernity and inevitably, this has caused a loss of identity. Arguably then, a major takeaway from this book is that India has to rewrite its own history on its own terms. And these terms could be only set by retrieving its own identity—which would predominantly mean rescuing the Hindu from the ‘-ism’.