

Kalinga and China : A Study in Ancient Relations

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India and China are two big countries in Asia, both celebrated for their long histories and cultural heritage. Between them, in ancient times there were brisk commercial, cultural and diplomatic interactions. Their communications both by land and sea have existed some two thousand years.¹ S.Beal² is of the view that the first authentic communication of China with India took place during the second century BCE (about *c.* 126 BCE) with the adventure of the Chinese ambassador Chang-k'ien. P.C.Bagchi,³ however, is of the opinion that as per legends (though historical confirmation is lacking) the first contact between India and China dates back to as early as 217 BCE. It was during the first century CE that "we get the first historical reference to the arrival of the Buddhist missionaries from India at the Chinese court." He said that the Buddhist missionaries did not arrive in China before *c.* 65 CE.⁴ From historical analysis it is gleaned that the traders first took the initiative, who were gradually followed by the missionaries, monks and royal missions.

The land route through which contact was carried out between India and China was known as the 'Silk Route' or the 'Central Asian Route' which originated from China and reached the Roman orient. India was connected with China along this route through two branches, one on

the north-west and the other in the north-east. The north-west branch of the 'Silk route' entered northwest India through Kashmir as well as Afghanistan (which also passing through the Central Asian caravan route reached the Roman Orient) while the second route, also known as 'Southern Silk Route' which passed through Sichuan and Yunnan provinces through Burma (Myanmar) and Northeast India reached the port of Tamralipti on the coast of the Bay of Bengal through the Brahmaputra and the Ganga. A branch of this route to India also passed through Nepal and Tibet. Throwing valuable light on this southern silk route S.Beal⁵ says "No doubt this was an old trade-route from China through Kamarupa, *i.e.*, the western part of Assam, towards the Ganges, and thence either to the central or northern provinces." Analyzing early Indo-Chinese contacts, particularly silk trade, Haraprasad Ray⁶ remarks: The history of yesteryear India and China was the period of brisk trade and material advancement. The notices on foreign countries helped China to form definite idea about the political and economic situation in the neighbouring and distant countries. Chinese silk had international market; hence, the Chinese bureaucracy was fully aware of the rising demand for silks, and utilized the potential of this trade in its foreign policies. Silk was listed among the most

important goods in Sino-foreign relations. Porcelain and even gold were included later.

The overseas contact between ancient India and China was no less significant. In the ancient maritime contacts between India and China, the modern Indian states of Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu played important roles. From archaeological excavations it is known that the ancient ports and port-towns like Tamralipti, Che-li-ta-lo/Manikpatna, Khalkattapatna, Palur, Kalingapatnam, Pithunda, Kaveripatnam etc., which dotted on the stretchy coast, on the western side of the Bay of Bengal served as the entrepots of Sino-Indian contacts. According to *Han Shu* (the *History of Former Han Dynasty*), written by Pan-ku (c.32 – 92 CE), the maritime route that linked India and China passed through the South-East Asian states of Sumatra, Java, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. The Chinese today call it the 'Maritime Silk Route' and 'it is this route that is relevant to intercourse between South India and China.'⁷

Buddhism which probably found its way from India to China in c. 71 CE⁸ (or some time in the first century CE) is the most significant contribution of ancient India to the Chinese history and culture. According to P.C. Bagchi,⁹ "Buddhism brought the two countries, China and India, together. The Buddhist missionaries of India were the most active agents in uniting the two peoples by cultural ties which in spite of the disappearance of the old religious beliefs still remain unbroken. A brisk trade continued to exist between the two countries from very early times, but its history is still in the dark. The Sino-Indian relation from the first to the eleventh centuries primarily centres round this powerful religion which for nearly one thousand years inspired the diverse races of almost the whole of Asia. It was through this religion that the greatest cultural

exchange took place between the Asiatic races during the first millennium of the Christian era. The routes of communication between India and China, although essentially trade routes, thus appear to us as Buddhist routes through which culture in all its aspects flowed from one country into the other."

Kalinga or ancient Odisha had political, cultural and commercial contacts with ancient China. The visits of Chinese pilgrims like Fa-Hien (Faxian), Hiuen-Tsang (Xuanzang) and I-Tsing (Yi-tsing or Yijing) to India in general and of Hiuen-Tsang to Odisha in particular furnished valuable information to testify this contact. The presence of celadon ware and Chinese coins in coastal Odisha also provide evidences for cultural and commercial nexus between China and Odisha. China knew about Kalinga through the Buddhist texts. The famous Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang who came to India during the time of Harshavardhan, in course of his travel visited Odisha in c. 638 CE and refers to an important sea-port town of ancient Odisha called *Che-li-ta-lo*. He says "Near the shore of the ocean, in the south-east, was the city of *Che-li-ta-lo*, above 20 *li* in circuit, which was a thoroughfare and resting place for sea going traders and strangers from distant lands."¹⁰ *Che-li-ta-lo* of Hiuen Tsang has been identified with excavated Manikpatna port on the Coast of Chilika Lake in the Puri district of Odisha. Hiuen Tsang also mentions about a famous Buddhist centre of Odisha named *Pu-su-po-ki-li* (Pushpagiri) which has been identified recently with the Langudi Vihara of Odisha.¹¹ He has left an interesting account relating to the commercial activities of the people of Odisha. The Buddhist missionaries from different parts of east coast through the Kalingan ports sailed to China since long. The Chinese legends speak of the first appearance of the Buddhist missionaries from India in the Chinese

capital as early as c. 217 BCE under the Ts'n Dynasty.¹² There was ambassadorial relationship between the two kingdoms. From the Chinese sources it is known that in the first half of the eighth century CE, a celebrated scholar of Odisha named Subhakara Simha carrying with him many tantric texts including *Maha Vairochana-Sutra* visited the court of Chinese emperor Hussan Tsung.¹³ On the request of the Chinese emperor he translated the Buddhist text *Maha-Vairochan-Sutra* into Chinese.¹⁴ He has been generally believed in China, as the son of the king of *Holing*, i.e. Kalinga or Odisha. He embarked for China from the port of Palur in c. 715 CE and arrived there in c. 716 CE. Another Buddhist monk, named Prajna, "who had settled in the monastery of the king of *Wu Cha* [Odra or Odisha]" went to China in c. 795 CE. He had taken with him a Buddhist manuscript named *Gandavyuha* autographed by the king of *Wu Cha* (Udra or Odisha) for the Chinese emperor Te-tsong.¹⁵ In China, Prajna stayed for some time and translated the *Shat-paramita Sutra* into Chinese.¹⁶ Prajna is stated to have migrated from the valley of the river Kapisa in Afghanistan to Odisha to acquire the knowledge of Yoga. The king of Odisha whose name has been mentioned in the Chinese sources as 'the fortunate monarch who does what is pure, the lion' has generally been identified with the Bhaumakara king Sivakara Unmattasimha.¹⁷ The monastery in Odisha where Prajna had settled has been equated with Ratnagiri *Mahavihara*. From such a valuable Buddhist presentation by a king of Odisha to an emperor of China, it is evident that there was close cultural contact between Odisha and China in the eighth century CE.¹⁸ However, this cultural relation presupposes commercial relation.

The sea-route to China, followed by ancient merchants as well as the missionaries

passed through Simhala/ Sri Lanka and Java. Tamralipti, an important port of Kalinga was the main point for embarkation and disembarkation of the sailors. Fa-Hien, in the fifth century CE returned from India to China through this route.¹⁹ I-Tsing arrived at Tamralipti in 673 CE by the sea-route from China.²⁰ Similarly Vajrabodhi, a Buddhist monk, returned to India from China through the port of Tamralipti.²¹ All of them preferred the sea-route because in ancient times the land route through central Asia was unsafe.²² Further, the visit of Buddhist scholars to China was possible because merchant vessels were plying between Odisha and China.²³ Fa-Hien returned from India to China in a large merchant vessel which had two hundred passengers on board. Both Subhakara Simha and Prajna must have travelled in merchant vessels since it was highly improbable that special ships were chartered for their exclusive use.²⁴

The cultural and commercial relations between Kalinga and China seems to have continued up to the end of the Eastern Gangas (14th century CE).²⁵ The perils of sea and precarious conditions and difficulties of travel never prevented the merchants and missionaries from taking up the sea journey. The *Chu-fan-chi*,²⁶ written by Chau Ju-kua (CE 1225-26) refers to *Kia-ling* Sea going vessels (i.e., Kalinga ships) and their system of trade organization. Chau Ju-kua mentions that there were two types of ships plying between Kalinga and Canton (China) which gives a clear impression that the Kalingans constitute one of the principal foreign traders in China. It is said that China's door was open to foreign ideas as well as trade.²⁷ K.S. Behera,²⁸ on the basis of *Chu-fan-chi* says that the ships used by merchants were certainly not of Chinese origin. Chau Ju-kua²⁹ says, "On large *Kia-ling* (*Kling*) sea-going ships every several hundred men, and on small ones a hundred and more men,

choose one of the more important traders as headman who, with an assistant headman manages various matters. The superintendent of merchant shipping (at Canton) gives them a certificate permitting them to use the light bamboo for punishing their followers. When one [of the company] dies, they (i.e. the headmen) make an inventory of his property.”

Besides literary sources, archaeological evidences also throw light on Kalinga-China relationship. The Chinese celadon wares, the Chinese porcelain with blue floral design on white background and Chinese copper coins, one complete and the other fragmented belonging to c.14th century CE which are discovered from Khalkatapatna provided substantial evidences to testify Odisha's relation with ancient China. Similarly, the excavations at Manikpatna (*Che-li-ta-lo* of Hiuen Tsang) yielded two types of evidences for maritime connections of Kalinga with China i.e. celadonware and Chinese copper coins. Celadonware occurs in abundance; though their proper study and classification is awaited. Apart from celadon ware, a fragmentary copper coin with characteristic square perforation in the centre of Chinese origin is also reported from here.³⁰ K.S. Behera³¹ says, this evidently came by way of sea-trade with China. In addition to this, the archaeological explorations at Lalitgiri, a Buddhist site in the Jajpur district of Odisha and the sensational discovery of relic caskets from a *stupa* at Lalitgiri is worth mentioning in the context of Odishan interaction with China. These relic caskets cover 4 in 1, kept systematically one inside another. This system is an alien feature to Odisha whereas it is a common practice in China, even till the present day.

Both from the literary and archaeological sources, however, not much is known about the volume of trade and the products involved in commercial transactions. From the accounts of

the Chinese writer Wang Ta-Yuan (14th century CE) we know that the natural products of Wutieh (Odias) were rice, king fishers' feathers, bees wax and fine cotton stuffs. Wang Ta-Yuan further mentioned that “because of the cheapness of living in Orissa [Odisha], nine out of ten persons going there for trade did not like to return home. Rice, which was evidently the staple food of the people, was sold at the unbelievably low price of 46 baskets for one cowrie.”³² Wang-Ta-Yuan also gives an idea about relative value of Odishan and Chinese currency. It is said that each of Odisha's silver coin (weigh two mace eight candareens) was equivalent in value to ten taels of Chung-t'ung Ch'ao (Chinese paper money). It exchanges for 11,520 odd cowries, and each coin can purchase 45 baskets of rice. China received precious stones, ivory, pepper, betel nuts, drugs and fine textiles for which Kalinga was famous. Kalinga, on the other hand imported Chinese ware, gold, silver, silk etc., from China.³³ *Chinamsuka* (the Chinese silk) was quite popular in Orissa.³⁴ On the other hand in the minds of the people of China, Kalinga was held in very high esteem. The commercial and cultural relationship between the two that began very early continued up to the medieval period as we have reference up to c. 1225-26 CE when *Chu-fan-chi* of Chau-Ju-Kua mentions about Kalingan ships. The fact is corroborated by Khalkatapatna and Manikpatna excavations.

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