

# Framing a Discourse: China and India in the Modern World

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One of the greatest tragedies of our times is that even as we speak of “a shrinking world” the languages available to us to characterise the relations between states have dangerously narrowed. In the hegemonic discourse, India and China are supposed to be “rivals” for economic power and stature and sections in the two countries view each other with suspicion. But we need to frame a counter discourse by turning to the experiences of individuals like Dwarkanath Kotnis, a doctor without borders, who was inspired to give expression to the ancient friendship between the two countries. We need similar acts of transgression on the part of many more people if the present sterile discourse about India and China is not to monopolise our imagination.

On 23 November 2006, on a state visit to India, Hu Jintao, president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), took some time out to visit an 85-year old woman in Mumbai by the name of Manorama Kotnis. More than six decades ago, her older brother Dwarkanath, who had studied medicine in what was then Bombay, departed along with four other doctors as part of an Indian medical humanitarian mission to China which was then fighting off a Japanese invasion. Dr Kotnis alone did not return from that mission: working throughout northern China over nearly five years, he treated thousands of wounded Chinese soldiers, often forgoing sleep for 72 hours at a stretch, and died on the battlefield from epilepsy in December 1942.

The notable Hindi film director, V Shantaram, capitalised on the goodwill Kotnis had generated to produce his rendering on celluloid, *Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (The Immortal Story of Dr Kotnis, 1946). That was more than six decades ago, and Kotnis has since been largely forgotten in India. In China, by contrast, Kotnis has ever since his death commanded adulation, even veneration. A set of two postage stamps honouring him on his 40th death anniversary were issued by the PRC, and his memorial grave in Shijazhuang, in Hebei province, where a large statue of the handsome Kotnis also stands in the Martyr’s Memorial Park, is reportedly covered with fresh flowers every day.<sup>1</sup> No state visit by a Chinese leader to India is viewed as complete without a visit to the Kotnis household.

It may be that the Chinese have merely become lachrymose about Kotnis, and arguably pockets of such sentimentality are all the more important when a country allows itself to be driven by an all-consuming instrumental rationality. Nevertheless,

even if one is inclined to cynicism, the indubitable fact remains that there appears to be considerable affection for Kotnis in China, and a foreigner’s sacrifice to save the lives of Chinese soldiers is warmly remembered. We might say that Kotnis is to China what C F Andrews has been to India. Andrews, an Anglican clergyman, was not only one of the great friends of Mohandas Gandhi: his work paved the way for the abolition of the system of indentured labour, and in his unstinting support for Indian independence he was a living instantiation of Gandhi’s firm belief that allies could be found even within the ranks of the oppressors. Andrews became known in India as “Deenabandhu” (“Friend of the Poor”) and in Delhi a section of the city, Andrewsganj, has been named after him.

Kotnis fell in love with a Chinese woman, Dr Qinglan Quo, and she gave birth to their son, Yinhua (or Inghwa). He signified to them the prospects of an enduring relationship between China and India: Yin means India, and Hua stands for China. As India gained independence in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, in an endeavour to strengthen ties between two countries that were bound together in anti-colonial resistance, became a staunch supporter of China’s claims to its place in the world. India was among the first (and very few) countries to recognise the PRC, and several Indian commentators have noted (Ganguly 2007; Suraiya 2008), ruefully one might add, that Nehru turned down the offer of a permanent United Nations Security Council seat for India in 1950 and instead suggested that China represent Asia. It is alleged that Nehru took this unusual step on the advice of the Soviets, and also took umbrage at this affront – the exclusion of China – to a great sister civilisation. The narrative of the lost opportunity for the Security Council seat may be legend, rather than fact; but if the legend, if legend it be, excites much interest today, it is obviously in relation to India’s expressed desire in recent years to be installed as a Permanent Member of the Security Council.

By the early 1950s the slogan, “Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai” (Indians and Chinese are

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Brothers) was resonating throughout India. Relations between the two countries were to be guided by the Panchsheel Principles – whereby the two countries agreed to respect each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and work towards peaceful coexistence – that was agreed to Zhou Enlai and Nehru in 1954. Nehru was at the helm of his reputation: Mountbatten later expressed an opinion that had Nehru died in 1958, he would have been remembered as the greatest statesman of the 20th century (Gopal 1984). Disputes over the Himalayan frontier between the two countries had been under negotiation for several years. The Chinese would in time claim that the borders had been imposed by a colonial regime when China was vulnerable and unable to aggressively put forth its position, while in the Lok Sabha Nehru affirmed that “so far as the broad boundary, the international frontier between India and the Chinese state including the Tibetan region is concerned, it is not a matter of dispute so far as we are concerned. It is a fixed thing. There is nothing to talk about” (*Lok Sabha Debates* 1958). The received view, certainly in India, is that China’s incursions into India in 1962, amounting to an undeclared war, sent Nehru into shock from which he never recovered. Nehru succumbed to a heart attack in 1964; Yinhua, the son of two doctors – one Indian and one Chinese – who met at the front, passed away in 1967. By then the friendship between the two countries, both ancient civilisations seeking to find their way in the modern world, was in tatters. “Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai” had by now given way to “Hindi Chini Bye Bye”.

### The Hegemonic Discourse

One of the greatest tragedies of our times is that, even as many liberal and well-meaning commentators speak of a shrinking world, of unprecedented transnational exchanges and the global movement of peoples, the languages available to us to characterise the relations between states have dangerously narrowed. Nation states are believed to be animated largely if not exclusively by considerations of self-interest, though, not surprisingly, interventions are always staged in the name of human rights and upholding the sovereignty of

law. Countries are expected to enter into profitable and certainly strategic alliances, and where a country stands in relation to other countries is determined by a number of indices – for instance, rates of literacy, infant mortality, and maternal mortality or, to summon the most ubiquitous of other measurements, a country’s GDP, its export earnings, the share of its population living on less than \$1 or \$2 a day – that have become so sacrosanct as to be scarcely questioned.

China’s ambassador to India, Zhang Yan, recently told a gathering at Hong Kong’s Asia Society that “the simultaneous rise of China and India is among the important developments of our times” (Zhang 2008). Many commentators have used much stronger language, describing it as a potentially seismic shift in the modern world order. The by-now familiar narrative of the dramatic rise of Asia’s two “slumbering giants”, China and India, is supremely illustrative of the manner in which the language of realpolitik has pre-empted all other kinds of conversations. Not very long ago the Cold War had divided the world, though there was also frequent talk of Japan as No 1 (to echo the title of a widely read book by Ezra Vogel) and the East Asian Tigers. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union rendered that discourse obsolete, even if one hears occasional hints, from those alarmed at Russia’s oil wealth, the rapid creation of a large class of billionaires, and its attempts to carve out spheres of influence, of a new Cold War. As China began, in this common narrative, to open itself up to the world, which in American thinking has meant little more than allowing the market free and unhindered access, Japan began to recede from the horizon. It began to dawn on India that if it had to be heard around the world, if India, an “ancient land”, was to gain (in the anguished words of the country’s diplomats and popular commentators) its “rightful and honoured place in the world”, it had to emulate China.

China is rightfully thought to have a huge lead on India: it embarked on economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in 1979, though India did so only in 1991. When P Chidambaram, who along with Manmohan Singh is viewed as having

liberated India from the “Hindu rate of growth”, unveiled in 1997 a budget extremely friendly to business interests and designed to remove summarily the constraints which had handicapped growth, he invoked Deng Xiaoping’s maxim, “Development is the only hard truth”. And it is the path of “development” to which both countries have since been resolutely dedicated: China has been registering an annual growth of something like 10% every year over the last decade, and India has not been far behind at 8 to 8.5% annual growth. India, which had depleted its foreign exchange reserves by the late 1980s, now holds \$270 billion in reserves (depleted over the past year from the \$300+ billion accumulated in early 2008), an amount nonetheless dwarfed by the \$1700 billion held by China.

China has flooded the world with cheap manufactured goods, while India has carved a niche for itself as the world centre for outsourcing, commanding 70% of the global market and 90% of the US outsourcing market. And one can continue in this vein, though perhaps the most telltale signs of such progress are most poignantly conveyed through personal recollections. Twenty years ago, a phone connection in India entailed a 10-year waiting period: there are now 300 million telephones, and a cellphone revolution has swept the country. In middle class homes, where there is much exultation at India’s rapid growth, captured in the phrase with which the Bharatiya Janata Party fought and lost the last elections, “India Shining”, one of the most frequently encountered stories is about how even vegetable vendors, *kabariwallahs*, and the milkmen carry mobiles. One suspects that in China, which at the end of 2007 had 910 million phone connections, there is an ample profusion of such stories.

To be sure, the narrative of the ascendancy of these two ancient countries to their proper place in the scale of nations is constantly ruptured by numerous discomfiting truths. Over 80% of India’s population still lives on less than \$2 a day, and this is also true of 35% of China’s population. China has admittedly shown vastly more improvement than India in lowering its maternal mortality rate, reducing malnutrition among children, increasing

literacy, and increasing the yield of rice and wheat per hectare. But frequently this is countered with observations about the genocidal implications of China's one-child policy, the deeply authoritarian strands of its ruling elites, the effacement of rural lifestyles and cultures deemed inimical to a modern outlook, large-scale ecological devastation, and the ruthless suppression of dissent. In some of these respects, at least, India seems to be more promising, if not to its own middle class elites who privately believe that a good dose of authoritarianism will speed up economic reforms and discipline an errant working class, at least to those in the west who are prone to hold up India as an example of a formerly colonised nation that has miraculously held on to the model of democracy and is even capable of awing the world with its cultural products, from the novel in English and a vibrant press to an exuberant popular cinema.

Not every commentator views the rivalry between India and China as a zero-sum game, just as there are others who, at least at this juncture, are persuaded that only China can eventually rival the United States. A small minority in India espouse the view that the English-language abilities of Indians confer on them advantages in global markets and business enterprises, just as another group of observers are divided on the question of whether India's experiment with democracy will yield surprising dividends or whether democracy makes India much more vulnerable, unable, for instance, to contain dissent as the Chinese state supposedly does so with enviable ease. Certainly the opposition of India as a democracy and China as an authoritarian regime continues to excite considerable attention in contemporary discussions, though it has also been suggested that the distinction is less meaningful since both countries have only prospered when socio-political reforms have been tied closely to growth (Yasheng 2008). In the hegemonic discourse, however, all such calculations are significantly less germane than an understanding of the strategic alliances being forged by the two countries, not to mention the manner in which the two countries negotiate their political differences.

Suspicion of China runs deep in India: when India conducted nuclear tests in 1998, then defence minister George Fernandes sought to diffuse tensions with Pakistan with the rather astonishing observation that India viewed China as "Enemy Number One". India has expressed its extreme displeasure at what is construed to be the obstructionist path taken by China at Vienna to block the Indo-us nuclear deal and accounts of Chinese perfidy have been rampant in the Indian press. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), which is opposed to the nuclear deal, is all too often accused by Indian writers as a veritable fifth column for the Chinese in India. Many in India deplore the pressure placed by PRC authorities on the Indian government to crack down on Tibetan dissenters, and the feeling is widespread that China has rewarded India's efforts to contain advocates of Tibetan independence with displays of contempt for its competitor.

### March of the Torch

Delhi is one capital where the Olympic torch was carried through the streets of the city without disruptions from Tibetans, but critics describe China's expression of its gratitude as woefully inadequate. What is less often mentioned is that the city was barricaded: whether or not China behaved like an ungrateful wretch and rewarded India's suppression of dissent by Tibetan activists by nearly railroading India's nuclear deal, the more pertinent consideration is surely that, in its effort to please the Chinese government, the Indian government thought nothing of hugely inconveniencing nearly an entire city and seriously curtailing the freedom of movement of a large number of the city's residents – all this so that the Olympic torch could be carried through a mile-long stretch without the disruptions that had attended the passage of the torch in Paris and London. If democracy is supposedly the trump card that India holds over China, the utter disdain with which the Indian State often treats its own citizens tells a different story.

China similarly views India's actions in having granted refuge to the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile with deep resentment. Nevertheless, whatever the flaws of Indian democracy, the Indian

position that it cannot surrender its rich traditions of hospitality to appease a powerful state seems unimpeachable. Sentiments generated by the war of 1962 aside, the position in India has consistently been that China, even if it lacks the imperialist ambitions of the us, is hostile to the development of another great power in its immediate neighbourhood. Indeed, China's wavering position on the question of a permanent Security Council seat for India is now being summoned as an instance of its unreliability: though in November 2006 India's Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, claimed with considerable fanfare that Hu Jintao backed India's quest for a permanent Security Council seat, the foreign affairs ministers' meeting of the Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) alliance in late May 2008 ended with China's refusal to endorse India's long-standing demand.

It appears, then, that India and China might have cause to view each other with hostility, notwithstanding their common journey as countries that, having shed their attachment to socialist ideologies, embraced market reforms. India's growing military ties with the us have not gone unnoticed in the PRC, and official Chinese publications have suggested that an American-Indian alliance might be countered with an alliance between the two erstwhile communist foes, China and Russia. India has also conducted military exercises with Japan and Australia, and there is some speculation in China that India might press forth for an alliance of democracies. With the enormously burgeoning energy needs of both India and China, competition between the two countries over the vast natural resources of central Asia has heightened considerably – though here, as in other areas, the Chinese showed themselves much more adept than the Indians in bagging lucrative contracts. Against all these considerations, the strategists suggest what they construe as an equally likely scenario: in an era where American dominance still remains a fact of life, China, India and Russia will be resolved to work together to forge a tripartite alliance that might create a bipolar world.

And, so, with such considerations discussions about the future of Sino-Indian relations totter from one realist position to

another. That, it appears, is the sum of the wisdom generated about the two oldest continuous civilisations in the world.

### Counter-Hegemonic Discourse

Long before either China or India had any substantive relations with the west, they had encountered each other in various domains of thought, art, and culture. A few fragments from that rich history should suffice to suggest that it is not merely that stories of trade along the Silk Route have now been supplanted by the present narrative of political and economic rivalry, but rather that the stories of previous times were told in different and varying idioms. Though political relations between India and China, to take one instance, have preoccupied many commentators, they do not appear to have entered into the calculations of those in the ancient and pre-modern periods who were most interested in seeing close relations between the two countries. Indeed, as the story of Dwarkanath Kotnis amply suggests, even at a time when the nation state sadly exercises an ironclad hold on our imagination and permits no wavering loyalties, there have been people who have rejected the narrow contours of a political nationalism for a more civilisational understanding of friendship and traditions of hospitality.

The transmission of Buddhism from India to China forms, of course, the most well-known and important segment of the history of Sino-Indian relations. The story of the coming of Buddhism to China from India, surely a momentous event in the unfolding of human affairs, may have prompted the diplomat, scholar, and historian K M Pannikar to declare with his customary flair that “intimate religious, cultural and social relations existed between the two major civilisations of Asia for a period of nearly 1,500 years. For nearly a 1,000 years, from the first century BC to the 10th century AD, it was one of the major facts of the world’s cultural history. Its importance in shaping the mind of east Asia, including Japan, Korea, and Mongolia, is something which cannot be over-rated” (Pannikar 1957). There is perhaps a touch of exaggeration in this generous assessment, but nevertheless the import of Buddhism’s entry into China must be

understood in more than the ordinary ways. As Buddhism declined in the land of its birth, eventually banished to the peripheries and to other countries, numerous Indian Buddhist texts survived only in translation. The Chinese Buddhist Tripitaka, a collection of literature translated from now largely lost Indian sources, is critical to an appreciation of world Buddhism.

The traffic between India and China was far from being one-way, even if the imprint of Chinese art and literature on India is much less visible. Indian monks and scholars travelling to China had their counterpart in Chinese travellers whose impressions and records of Indian society remain, in some cases, virtually the only documentation we have for those periods. Fa-Hien (also Faxian), a monk, pilgrim, and scribe, spent 15 long years (399-414 AD) in what he described as the central realm of Buddhism, stretching from Kabul and Peshawar to the eastern end of the Gangetic plains. He visited all the principal sites associated with the Buddha, conversed with monks, and copied Buddhist texts. More famous still is Hsuan Tsang (also Huiyen Tsang), who travelled widely in India in the first half of the seventh century: but for his extensive notes we would have known comparatively little about the reign of the illustrious Harshavardhana of Kanauj (606-647) or the declining fortunes of Buddhism throughout the land rendered fertile by the Ganga. Hsuan Tsang planted himself at Nalanda, then indisputably one of the greatest centres of learning in the world; and it is at the same university that I-Ching (or I-tsing) arrived some years later to embark on a long course of study.

These are but fragments of a long history, other elements of which take us to very different terrains. To take two examples: One knows of the trade links between India and China, but who would have thought that Chinese silk was so well regarded in India that it would make an appearance in such signature pieces of Indian literature as Kalidasa’s fifth century play, *Shakuntala*, or the *Harsacarita* of the seventh century playwright, Bana. It is with equal astonishment that one learns that the sine tables of the mathematician

and astronomer Aryabhata had been translated into Chinese by the early eighth century (Needham 1959). The Chinese astronomer of Indian origins, Gautam Siddha, had rendered the Navagraha calendar into Chinese, and C K Raju rightly notes that “calendar-making in China was for centuries done by Indian Buddhists settled in China” (Raju 2007). Where Indian astronomers would arrive at the value of  $\pi$  using numerical calculations, their contemporaries in China did so using geometric methods, “including a polygon of up to 16,384 sides” (ibid, 148). In either case, they were considerably ahead of mathematicians in Europe. There is always the temptation to suppose that the history of India is best written in the idiom of religion, but clearly the encounters between India and China cannot be written only as chapters of the story of the transformation of Buddhism into a world religion.

It has been said of China, and perhaps of every other great civilisation, that it thought of itself as the centre of the world. The entire notion of the “Middle Kingdom” doubtless lends itself to that interpretation, but very recent scholarship also suggests that the infusion of Indian thought in China during the medieval period posed a serious intellectual challenge to the educated Chinese elite who took it as axiomatic that China’s superiority to other civilisations could not be questioned. In the 20th century, the movement seems to have been partly reversed – nowhere better captured than in the slogan made famous by the Naxalites, “China’s chairman is our chairman”. Beijing’s seemingly brilliant execution of its Olympics dream and its display of athletic suzerainty has convinced the Indian middle class that it is now India which has everything to learn from China.

Now that their abject surrender to the free market has rendered even West Bengal’s once famed Marxists obsolete, any talk of the civilisational tenor of the ties that once bound China and India into something of a common framework of traditions of interculturality and hospitality might seem like nothing more than woolly-headed romanticism. Some might argue that the past always encroaches on the present, and here unpleasantly so: it is the

opium from India that turned China into a nation of millions of addicts. In the destruction wrought by the massive importation of opium into China from the early 18th century through the close of the 19th century, the suffering inflicted upon the Chinese was on a scale only equalled by the slave trade. True, the opium trade flourished when India was under British occupation, and the East India Company was largely responsible for brutally enforcing its will upon a powerless people in its relentless quest for profits. However, as one historian has recently written of Bombay, its destiny “as a great commercial and industrial centre was born of its becoming an accomplice in the drugging of countless Chinese with opium, a venture in which the Indian business class showed great zeal alongside the East India Company” (Farooqui 2006). The evils of colonial rule are neither diminished by the readiness to admit that some Indians thrived in the culture of greed nor by the willingness to seek the forgiveness of the Chinese, who on more than one occasion had turned to India for enlightenment, for India’s hand in the suppression of Chinese aspirations for sovereignty.

The links between China and India appear to have snapped eons ago. In 1931, the journalist Edgar Snow, who is renowned for his accounts of China, was on a visit to India. He described himself as being “impressed with the amazing fact that these two countries, with the oldest continuous civilisations, with close religious and cultural ties, and which between themselves hold about half the men and women of the world, had such poor means of communication between them. Their cultural centres were farther from each other by existing land routes than either one was from Europe or America – just as far apart, in fact, as in the days when Buddhism was carried over the Himalayas to the Chinese Empire” (Snow 1944). And, yet, almost on the eve of launching the Quit India movement in 1942, Gandhi addressed a letter to Chiang Kai-Shek which suggests that the old connections between the two civilisations had not entirely dissipated into oblivion. Describing with affection the Chinese people he had known in Johannesburg, Mauritius, and India, Gandhi characterised

Nehru and himself as drawn towards China and its struggle against oppression. “Because of this feeling I have towards China and my earnest desire that our two great countries should come closer to one another and cooperate to their mutual advantage,” wrote Gandhi, “I am anxious to explain to you that my appeal to the British power to withdraw from India is not meant in any shape or form to weaken India’s defence against the Japanese or embarrass you in your struggle.” India’s freedom would not be gained at the expense of China’s freedom, and Gandhi added that “whatever action I may recommend will be governed by the consideration that it should not injure China, or encourage Japanese aggression in India or China” (Gandhi 1942). It is, of course, a testament to Gandhi’s capacity to withstand criticism that he held on to this sentiment even as he was aware of the fact that some within China viewed him as “the agent of British imperialism”, as an enemy who had to be opposed “in order to guarantee the victory of the revolution”.<sup>2</sup>

There is thus a moral imperative to hold on to the ideas expressed by Rabindranath Tagore, himself a traveller to China whose interlocutors included the philosophers Liang Sou-Ming, Hu Shih, Chang Chun-mai, and Fung Yu-lan.<sup>3</sup> Inaugurating the “Cheena Bhavan” (China House) at his own Visvabharati University in 1937, Tagore described it as occasion to “redeem, on behalf of our people, an ancient pledge implicit in our past, the pledge to maintain the culture and friendship between our people and those of China, an intercourse whose foundations were laid eighteen hundred years back by our ancestors with infinite patience and sacrifice” (Tagore 1996). If a certain Dwarkanath Kotnis, a doctor without borders, could be inspired to redeem that pledge to the point of sacrificing his life, similar acts of transgression on the part of many more might be necessary if the present sterile discourse about India and China is not to monopolise our imagination.

## NOTES

- 1 The People’s Republic of China is one of the few countries in the world which, I am tempted to

say, has judged Mohandas Gandhi unworthy of its approbation – insofar as one can infer this from a country’s postage stamps. One might have said to China’s credit that it is, at least in this matter, one nation state that has not indulged in sheer hypocrisy. However, a statue of Gandhi was installed in Beijing in 2004, though I am not aware of the circumstances under which it came up in Chao Yang Park, reportedly one of the city’s “elite” public spaces. The sculptor has described Gandhi as adhering to the same principles found in the teachings of Confucius. See <http://www.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=54423> (accessed 1 October 2008).

- 2 This is from a message to the Indian working classes by the All-China Labour Federation in July 1930. See Hemen Ray, “Changing Soviet Views on Mahatma Gandhi”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no 1 (November 1969), p 94.
- 3 Chinese translations of Tagore’s work first appeared in 1915, and in 1924 the Crescent Moon Society was founded in Peking to promote his poetry and more generally Sino-Indian cultural relations.

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