CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INDIA-CHINA TRADE FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE ADVENT OF BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY IN BENGAL IN 1765.

First Phase

Ever since the dawn of history India had commercial and cultural contacts with China. Some references of these contacts are found in the works of Manu\(^{(1)}\) and Kautiliya\(^{(2)}\), and also in the great epic the Mahabharata\(^{(3)}\). All these sources refer to the 'Cinas' (Chinese) as the people living on the borders of India; 'Cinapatta' (silk) as the article of commerce; and again the 'Cinas' as the soldiers who took part in the battle of Kurukshetra. The very mention of the Chinese people and their products in our epics proves beyond doubt that China had links with India and even trade relations with the Mauryan empire.

The first official record of India-China commercial contacts, and the routes through which the trade passed is found in the Chinese record Shi-ki\(^{(4)}\), written by


Ssu-ma-Ch'i'en, a great historian of China. This record contains an interesting story about the Chinese General Chang Ch'i'en's political adventures in Ta-hia (Bactria) during the period from 137 B.C. to 127 B.C.; and his detailed report which, after his return from Ta-hia, Chang Ch'i'en submitted to Wu-ti, the Han Emperor of China (140 B.C. - 87 B.C.). This report says:

To the south-east of it (Bactria) is the country of shen-tu (India) (5)

From shen-tu, or as they (merchants) call it, the country of Po-lu-man (brahmans) the merchants obtain products of the shu country (Szechwan) of China. And, these products..., silk and bamboo sticks, are being sold in Ta-hia. (6)

The report further gives interesting information about the location of India and China. It says:

Ta-hia (Bactria) being 12,000 li (7) distant from China and to the south-west of the later; and the country of shen-tu being several thousand li to the south-east of Ta-hia; and the goods of shu being found there, that country (India) cannot be far from shu. (8)

Though politically Chang Ch'i-en did not succeed in his mission (9), yet commercially he brought an important
information, i.e. from whence the foreign goods came and whither the Chinese goods went. He suggested to the Emperor to send an ambassador to Ta-hia through the southern route (Sadiya-Rima route) which passed through India. Chang Ch'ien considered this route safer and shorter than the Central Asian routes which passed through the territories occupied by the Hunas in the north and the K'langs (Tibetans) in the south.

This suggestion enkindled the imagination of the Chinese Emperor, Wu-ti, and he took steps to trace the direct line of trade with India. He undertook a number of military operations in the south-west of China and in Central Asia. In the south-west he conquered the states of Yunnan and Kweichow but was not much successful in taming the mountain tribes of Ta-li-fu region. In Central Asia he had successfully ousted the Hunas by 119 B.C., and had formed an alliance with the Wu-Sun of the Illy valley who dominated the northern Central Asian route. Thus both the northern and the southern caravan routes of Central Asia became safe. Besides, to ensure the safety of the caravan traders, Wu-ti set up military posts along both the routes. These measures gave impetus to the trade on the one hand and


enhanced China's political sphere of influence on the other. (12)

Evidently Chang Chien's adventure to Ta-hia (Bactria) had favourably affected the political and commercial relations between India and China. During his life time, Wu-ti kept the passage safe for the traders through both the Central Asian routes, and they freely plodded between India and China. The missionaries and the cultural emissaries followed suit. But with the death of Wu-ti in 87 B.C., safety of the routes could not be ensured due to two reasons. Firstly, Wu-ti spent lavishly on the Central Asian wars which exhausted the treasury and thereby rendered his successors unable to extend or even maintain the political limits laid by him. Secondly, the trade through the new Central Asian routes did not bring the expected profits. On the contrary the expenditure on the maintenance of the Turkestan armies far exceeded the income from the tributes of the newly-acquired States (13). Hence with the death of Wu-ti ended the first phase of the contacts between China and India.

Second Phase

The second phase of India–China contacts started in

the reign of Kanishka (78-101 A.D.)\(^\text{(14)}\) in India, and that of the Chinese General Pan Chao (73-109 A.D.) in China. In India and Central Asia, the Kushana power under Kanishka was at the acme of its glory before 89-90 A.D. and his dominions included Baltistan, Ladakh, Kashmir and parts of eastern and western Turkestan. On the other hand Pan Chao became powerful in Central Asia after 90 A.D. Having a common border, the great contemporaries seemed to have agreed to establish a combined Government in Khotan, as is suggested by Charles Eliot. The combination of the two governments is illustrated by the coins with legend in Chinese on the obverse and Prakrit on the reverse, and the coins are of later date than 73 A.D.\(^\text{(15)}\) Both these rulers gave comparative peace and stability to the area, and trade flourished on both the routes of Central Asia. Moreover it was during this period that many Indians settled in Central Asia and traded with adjoining countries.

On the Bhamo-Yunnan route the India-China trade was quite brisk during the first Century of

\(^{\text{(14)}}\) For the controversy about the date of Kanishka see: Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *Early History of Northern India* (Calcutta, 1968), Appendix II, pp. 74-81 and 95-100.

Silk and medicinal herbs moved from Yungtze to Szechwan and Ta-li-fu on the Yunnan plateau, and thence down to the Irrawaddy to Pagan, which became the centre of India-China trade during that period (16).

Another source, 'The Periplus of the Erythrean sea' (17) also confirms that China and India had commercial contacts during the first century of the Christian era.

The anonymous author of this book says that:

North of the Chryse lay China, the land called T'sin, difficult to access, whence raw silk, raw yarn and silk cloth were brought on foot through Bactria to Barygaza (Sharoach near Karachi), and were also exported to Damirica (South India) by way of river Ganges (18).

Hence it is quite clear that Chinese silk was reaching India during the first century of the Christian era.

Next source of our information is an account of the Chinese traveller, Fa-hien. He came to India in religious pursuit and stayed here for about six years (405-411) during the Gupta period (320 A.D. to 539 A.D). In his diary, Fo-kwo-ki (19) he states that during this

(19) Fo-kwo-ki ('Diary of Buddha’s country) is translated by James Legge (tr.) A Record of the Buddhist Kingdom (London, 1886).
period commerce between India and China increased with the influx of Buddhism\(^{(20)}\).

Another Chinese record of this time, Shung-shu\(^{(21)}\) (420 A.D. - 479 A.D.) states that a king of Kapili valley (river in Assam) sent an embassy to China in 428 A.D., which probably went through the Lohit route. However, the very mention of an Assamese river and Assamese ruler in Chinese records proves that during the fifth century of Christian era the contacts between India and China were frequent.

**Third Phase**

The third phase of India-China contacts starts with the visit of the Chinese traveller Hieun-tsang, who came to India during the first half of the seventh century (630–645). His account of India, in Si-yu-ki\(^{(22)}\), is an important source of this period. It tells us that during that time there was a regular intercourse between India and China through Assam and Central Asia; and that the Assam route was frequently used by the traders and

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\(^{(20)}\) Buddhism was recognised as a State religion by the Chinese Emperor Ming-ti in 67 A.D. Hence from this date onwards role of Buddhism became dominant in bringing the two countries closer to each other.

\(^{(21)}\) Citation, B.A. Saletore, *op.cit.*, pp. 113-14.

\(^{(22)}\) *Si-Yu-ki* (ṣī-yù-kī) = Buddhist Records of the western world is translated by Samuel Beal (tr.), *Chinese Account of India* (Three Vol. Calcutta, 1858); Also see: Thomas Watters (tr.)., *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* (Two Vols., London, 1904).
and that the rulers of both the countries had great regards for each other, though they could not visit each other due to natural barriers. (24)

The route through Burma (Bhamo-Yunnan) was also frequently used by the Burmese and Chinese traders during the seventh century. References about Burma and its rulers are conspicuous in the records of T'ang monarchs (618-906 A.D.), and, in order to ensure the safety of the traders, the latter established four garrisons in Central Asia namely Kashgar, Kucha, Karashar and Khotan. Thus during the T'ang period, the comparative peace in Central Asia and China gave impetus to the caravan trade which proved more beneficial than during the Han period.

But this state of affairs did not last long. In Central Asia the Tibetans had become powerful under their leader Song-tsen-Gampo. After defeating the Chinese in 670 A.D. they forcibly held these garrisons. They also cut Chinese communications with the west and laid the foundation of the Tibetan empire in Central Asia. (26)

Ultimately, according to a Chinese historian Fa-twan-lin,

(23) Watters, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 188.
(25) The T'ang records mention the existence of 18 Chieftainships in Burma; and for the 9th century the records mention P'iao, which is Pyu (Prome), the capital of which is Srikheta. V.B. Desai, India and Burma: A Study (Calcutta 1954), p. 5.
the Tibetans were defeated by the joint armies of China and Kashmir(27). Later on, the great Kashmiri King Lalitaditya, defeated the Dards and the Tibetans, and, to safeguard the trade with China, established a camp on the shores of Mahapadma (Wuler lake)(28).

However, with the advent of Arabs in India (711 A.D)(29) and in Central Asia, and with the fall of the T'ang dynasty in China (960 A.D.), there was a political chaos in Central Asia, as a result of which its trade routes became unsafe. The border states became independent. The Arabs and the Tibetan pirates roamed about the caravan routes of Central Asia. The weak Sung Dynasty (960 A.D.-1277 A.D.) was unable to ensure safety of these routes. Hence it shut herself inside the Great wall of China.(30) In short, the rise of Islam in Central Asia gave a severe blow to the Central Asian Caravan trade.

The eastern route to China (Bhamo-Yunnan route) was also being blocked by the Tibetans. The Tibetan generals and ministers occupied and administered almost

(27) James Burgess (tr.), 'Ma-twan-lin's Thien-Chu', Indian Antiquary Vol. IX (1880), p.21; Also see P.N. Kaul, A History of Kashmir (New Delhi,1912),p.110.
(29) Muhammad-bin-Qasim invaded Sindh in 711 A.D. and defeated its ruler, raja Dahir.
the whole Kansu as well as the greater part of Szechwan and northern Yunnan. They blocked the trade routes which passed through these provinces to Assam and Burma. In 698 A.D., the Chinese Governor of Szechwan, petitioned to the king of China in these terms:

The province of Yunnan was kept open in earlier dynasties because through Yunnan, China was commercially connected in the west with Ta-tsin (India or Rome) and in the south with Indo-China. Tax receipts in cloth and salt are now declining and precious tributes fail to come. We press our people to garrison the territories of the tribes to no purpose. I, therefore, suggest that we withdraw from Yao-Chow (midway between Kunming and Ta-li), and leave the tribes, south of the river Lu (Yangtze), as vassal states, and prohibit all traffic except by special permission.

Thus due to the decrease in trade the Emperor of China finally closed the south-western route from China to India.

In 754 A.D., China again came into conflict with the Kingdom of Yunnan, then known as Nan-Chao or Mithilarashtra, where rose a Hinduised kingdom of Thais. Its ruler, Ko-lo-fong, inflicted a defeat upon the Chinese in 754 A.D. and closed all the commercial relations with China. In Burma too it was an age of conflict between the Thais, the Mons and the Burmese. Uptil 1044 A.D., when Anawratha,

(34) Ibid, pp. 431-32.
the first maker of Burma came to the throne, there was chaos in the country. The trade and commerce were till then a private enterprise with the multeers and merchants who traded and bartered on their own account, through the difficult tracks between Yunnan and Burma.

Another route to China through Assam (Lohit route) was, however, not much affected by the upheavels of Central Asia and trade was quite brisk on this route during the Malechha dynasty (655 A.D.-1000 A.D.). There was a great commercial activity:

the roads and waters of Assam bustled with congested traffic...shops of musk (brought from Tibet), sandal wood, silk (brought from China), gold, jewellery and cosmetics... were congested with the merchants, traders and purchasers. (35).

But after the Malechha dynasty there was a period of chaos and unsettled history in Assam due to the Turk invasions. (36) The condition remained the same during the Pala dynasty (1000 A.D.-1130 A.D.) and the Deva dynasty (1130 A.D.-1228 A.D.) until the rise of the Ahoms in 1228 A.D. These disturbances hindered the smooth flow of commercial and cultural activities. Besides, with the fall of Deva dynasty of Assam, there was a rapid


(36) For this period almost a contemporary account bears the testimony of these invasions: H. Raverty (tr.) Tabagat-i-Nasiri (London, 1873) p.560; Also see R.M. Nath, op.cit., p.49; and B.K. Barua, Cultural History of Assam (Madras, 1951), p.37.
growth of tribes in the north-east of Assam. These tribes were to prove a great hindrance to the India-China trade for a long time to come.

**Fourth Phase**

With the rise of Sultans under the slave dynasty (1206 A.D.-1290 A.D.) in India and that of the Mongols (1277 A.D.-1290 A.D.) in China, started the fourth phase of India-China contacts. For this period our major sources are the accounts of Marco Polo and the Persian records of the Sultans. The latter throw interesting light on the intercourse between India and China.

The first Persian record of the reign of Ilutmish (1211 A.D.-1235 A.D.), Futuh-ut-Salatin of Isami, refers to the presence of the Chinese merchants in Delhi. (37) It also tells us that these merchants once displayed their articles before the Sultan. (38)

Similarly, Marco Polo, while travelling through the Central Asian routes enroute to China in 1287 A.D., mentions the caravan sarais along the route for the convenience of the caravan travellers. (40) He also

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(37) Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Ed) Studies in Medieval Indian History (Aligarh, 1956), pp. 11-14.
(38) Ibid., p. 11.
(39) For the accounts of Marco Polo see: Aldo Ricci (tr.), Travels of Marco Polo (London, 1950); Also see Henry Yule, The Book of Ser Marco Polo (Two Vols.) (Three Editions, London, 1871, 1903, 1929)
(40) Aldo Ricci, *op.cit.*, p. 73.
alludes to Kashgar and Samarkand as the most important entrepots of commerce of Central Asia and to the trade which the inhabitants of these cities carried on with India, China and the West. (41)

Marco Polo further informs that to standardize the currency throughout Asia, the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan adopted the paper-money of China, (42) and secured the safety of the caravan routes of Central Asia from the Arab and the Tibetan pirates. Thus once again the routes were enlivened with the long rows of caravans. He also established military and post stations, with necessary grain stores and pasture lands at frequent intervals along both the caravan routes of Central Asia. Consequently, the roads were thronged, as probably never before or since, with caravans and envoys enroute to or from the great camp of Karakoram, the Mongol capital of China.

Kublai Khan also endeavoured to clear the southern routes to India (Lohit and Bhamo-Yunnan route). He occupied the land of Mien (Burma) (43) after five separate invasions. Although the Mongols failed to establish any lasting foothold in this area due to geographical barriers, (44) yet they regarded Burma as a tributary

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(41) Loc. cit., p. 62.
(42) Loc. cit., p. 65.
(44) K.S. Latourette, The Chinese, their History and Culture (New York, 1951), p. 266.
state(45) and maintained the commercial links with it through Yunnan. Marco Polo informs us that to the South-west of Yunnan there was a large place, probably Bhamo, where a great market was held and:

all the people of the district go thither on certain fixed days, three times a week.... here come the merchants from different countries and exchange their silver for these people's gold.... no one can go to their homes.... so strong and impassable is the region they inhabit...(46).

He also informs that in certain provinces porcelain shells were used as money:

In Carajan (Yunnan province) and Zardandan (Szechwan) Porcelain shells were used as money but these shells were not found in the country but were brought from India. (47).

Similarly, Shihab-ud-din Ahmad, a contemporary of Muhammad-bin-Tughluq says that 'the garments of Muhammad-bin-Tughluq for summer season were prepared in Delhi but their stuff was brought from China and Iraq'(48).

Another source of this period, Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi (49), informs us that 'two thousand girls in the harem of Khan-i-Jahan (Mohammed-bin-Tughluq) belonged to Rome and China.'(50)

(47) Loc. cit., p. 188.
(49) Though Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi is a history of the reign of Firoz Shah Tughluq (1351 A.D.-1388 A.D.), but occasionally makes useful references to Muhammad-bin-Tughluq: Zia-ud-din Barani (tr.), Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi (Calcutta, 1862).
(50) Ibid., p.400; Also see, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, op.cit.,p.13.
Obviously these references in the sources of the medieval period testify that India during the Sultans had commercial contacts with the Mongol China. The Mongols too were very keen to maintain these contacts. According to the testimony of Moor traveller, Ibn-Battuta (1304-1378 A.D.), Toghan-Timur (The Chinese called him Sun-ti, 1333-68) the ruler of China, sent an embassy to India during Muhammad-bin-Tughluq's rule. The Chinese mission consisted of fifteen men with a retinue of hundred servants. Led by Turai, the mission brought enormous gifts for the Sultan. In 1342 A.D. Muhammad-bin-Tughluq reciprocated the gesture by sending a bigger party with a larger quantity of gifts. This party was headed by Ibn Battuta himself.

Battuta is also full of praise for the commercial activities at the Subansiri river of Assam. He says:

The king of Assam (Joyanarayan of Kolita dynasty, ruling to the east of Subansiri river, with Sadiya as capital) had effected

(51) For Ibn Battuta's accounts see Urdu and English translations by Agha Mehdi Husain (tr.) Rehla-i-Ibn-i-Battuta (Baroda, 1935); Also see H.A.R.Gibb (tr.) Ibn Battuta (London, 1929).
(52) Agha Mehdi Husain, op.cit.(Urdu Translation),p.77.
(54) Ibid.
(55) While going to China, first Battuta attempted to go by land route through Assam. But due to the tribal barrier, he retraced his steps and started for China by sea route.
such an arrangement that both the banks of the river (Subansiri) were full of shops, bazars, factories and flourishing villages.... The waters of the river.... so congested with merchant boats that beating of the drums was resorted to by the boatmen to guard against the collision (56).

However, Battuta could not proceed to China through Assam route as the hinterland of Assam was infested with the warlike primitive tribes. Also the area was considered as the land of witchcraft, (57) for here Muhammad Tughluq's armies had perished (1337-38) beyond any trace. Therefore, he proceeded through the sea route. He confirmed Marco Polo's accounts that there were trade contacts between India and China through these eastern routes until the 14th century.

Fifth Phase

The fifth and the last phase, before the advent of the Britishers, starts with the Mughals. During this period (A.D. 1526-1857), the Chinese goods such as silk and porcelain were the chief imports from China to the Mughal Empire. The porcelain found much favour with the Mughal Emperors and their nobles. The porcelain wares were specially esteemed because it was believed to split or break if brought into contact with poisoned food. Hence

(56) Ibid. (Urdu Translation), pp. 235-36.

(57)'Alamgir Namah' (English translation), Asiatic Researches Vol II (1892), p. 731.
Akbar's dinner was always served in porcelain dishes. (58) When Akbar (1556 - A.D. - 1605 A.D.) died, he left at Agra alone the elegant vessels of every kind of porcelain worth more than two and a half million rupees. Majority of the best porcelain wares seemed to belong to the Ming period (1368-1644) while a few pieces were from the Sung period (960-1280). Hence the efforts to keep the trade links with China open were never slackened.

The Imperial records (59) of Akbar's time confirm that he himself took great interest in maintaining the peace and the safety of the caravan routes. The land trade during this period followed two main routes. One was from Lahore to Kabul through the Khyber pass (60) namely the Imperial Route or Pir-Panjal route. The second from Multan to Kandhar through the Bolan pass. A third route which was more arduous than the previous two was also in use. It connected India with China and passed through the Karakoram pass. Apart from silk and porcelain wares the 'sandal wood' used to come from China. And, afterwards, this tree was successfully planted in India. (61) Even

(59) Ain-i-Akbari: of Abul Fazal Alami. It has been translated by H.Beveridge (3rd edn. Delhi, 1972, in three volumes).
(60) A stein, 'Notes on Routes from the Panjáb to Turkestan and China recorded by William Finch in 1611', JPHS, Vol.VI, No.2 (Lahore, 1917), p. 145.
Chinese art and artists were quite familiar in the court of Akbar. While praising the court-painter Daswant, Abul Fazal says, 'Daswant's paintings were not behind those of Behzad (a master painter of the court of Shah Mirza of Herat) and the painters of China'. (62)

The existence of trade relations between India and China in the seventeenth century has been confirmed by William Finch (63) who travelled through Central Asia in 1611 A.D. According to him 'Yarkand was still the Chief mart of the Chinese Turkestan. Silk, porcelain, musk, rhubarb were the chief articles coming from China proper, and passing through Yarkand and Kashgar to India and Afghanistan.' (64).

During Aurangzeb's time (1658-1707), his Governor of Bengal, Mir Jumla conquered Assam in 1663. (65) The Chief object of this conquest of 'wild and untamed land of immense extent' was to keep the road to China open. Hence Mir Jumla boasted that he:

had opened the road to China.... see the Mughal standards meeting those of Tartar

(64) Ibid, p. 145.
(65) F. B. Bradley Birt, The Romance of an Eastern Capital (London, 1906), p. 120.
relatives of the Emperor, the descendants of Jenghiz Khan, who had long since founded their Kingdom in the farthest east. The Mughal empire united should stretch from sea to sea. (66).

Unfortunately the triumph of Mir Jumla was brief as he fell a prey to disease while retreating in 1663, and died near Dacca.

The trend of the trade during the last quarter of the seventeenth century was more towards the sea. Even before that, Akbar and Jahangir had been interested in the sea trade as the first English mission had already reached Akbar's court. Countries like Spain, Britain, America, Arabia and Portugal were very active in the sea-trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A Spanish historian estimates that £400,000,000 in silver were imported into Philippines from Spanish America between 1571-1821; and, that half of which went for the Chinese silk, porcelain and other commodities.

When British East India Company became a territorial power in India in 1765, the competition for the China trade through the sea-route was quite hard. Therefore it became necessary for the Company to find some other channel to reach the fabulous markets of China. Thus started the chain of adventures to probe the land-routes through Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam which, eventually landed the Company on the Lhasa-Kalimpong route in 1904.

(66) Ibid., p. 121.