

India, China and the tussle for hegemony in the Indian Ocean Region

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Vikash Ranjan Singh

Assistant Professor

Department of history

Zakir Husain Delhi College (eve.)

Abstract: This paper traces the journey of India and China in the waters beginning with the ancient past. Emphasizing on the strong maritime traditions inculcated in the very nature of both the civilizations manifested through the growth of trade and commerce, the journey from the beginning of civilization is traced. The time frame of significant development throughout the ancient and medieval period are aptly discussed with focusing on the evolution in the statecraft and ship building. A well developed maritime trade network provided the much needed thrust for the economic advancement of both India and China. The paper traces this voyage from the beginning of primitive interaction in the waters and the gradual emergence of the trade networks with diplomatic channels evolving through the

interaction. Various literary sources of the concerned time periods are used as the testament of the fact that the Indian Ocean Region was extremely crucial for both the contenders in the region and both defended their positions vehemently. This interaction is also judged through the lens of ever-changing and ever evolving dynastic politics and the involvement of local traditions. Buddhism as a major factor of influence and interaction is also discussed and the cultural involvement due to the journeys into the sea and the aftereffects are touched upon.

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India and China are two of the oldest and surviving civilizations. Both these dynamic civilizations have performed impressively from ancient times till date. Despite of their share of setbacks, rich maritime traditions are an integral part of both these nations. This work offers an investigation of India and China's vast historical journey in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and those factors that shaped their odyssey.

Early Maritime Tradition/ Interaction (5000 BCE- 600 BCE)

Land was the basic resource for a land-based civilization like Chinese civilization that started from the Huang He River Plain. For centuries, Chinese people feared rivers, not the sea due to frequent change in the course of the river Huang He. Seas were the provider of fish, salt and the only peaceful boundaries to the East.

Yi were the first people in Chinese history who developed the maritime traditions which can be traced back to 1600 BCE. Developed from the Neolithic tribes, the people of Eastern and Southern China, were located around Yellow River Valley. Those people of Neolithic tribe were spread around the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The Southerners spoke the language of Khmers and the Easterners of the Austronesians. Tibeto-Burman was the language of inland people. Yi people were dependent on the seas for their livelihood while the inland people based their livelihood on land.

The Shang Dynasty, also known as the Yin Dynasty was founded by some sections of the Yin tribe. They were the earliest dynasty of traditional Chinese history based on archaeological support. They inhabited the coastal areas of Hopei and Shantung. Australian historian Wang Gungwu suggested that these tribes may have come from the South or they had trade relations with Southern Asia. He arrived on this conclusion on the basis of Cowrie shells that were used by the Yin tribal people. But the above statement was not supported by substantial evidence.

India's Early Maritime interaction (5000 BCE-600 BCE)

Since ancient times, India is extremely rich as the land of many wide and navigable rivers which helps it in national and international trade. On their way to the broad sea, merchants from those time, preferred to sail down the river from Benares to Tamaralipti despite the presence of land-route. The three principal rivers the Ganga, the Indus and the Brahmputra remain navigable for whole year because of their perennial nature.

By 3000 BCE, the Indus River region has started to show increase in maritime voyages in length as well as frequency. Favorable conditions also existed for viable long-distance voyages from 2900 BCE.

Archeological sites such as Lothal, Padri, Bet Dwarka etc. from Harappan period have shown shoreline movements. Located at the head of the Gulf of Khambhat, Lothal is widely regarded as the world's oldest dockyard since 2400 BCE. Measuring 213 m into 36 m, a large brick at Lothal is identified as a dockyard. Some stone anchors found in the vicinity clearly demonstrate that Lothal was an important center of maritime trade. Many things were discovered at this site like Persian Gulf seal, guerrilla, terracotta model of African mummy and boat model suggest Lothal's maritime relations with distant lands like Egypt and Mesopotamia. Ships from this site traded to China in the Far East and to coasts of Africa. Trade was carried out through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf up to Babylon and Mediterranean areas in the west. During the time of Sargon of Akkad in Mesopotamia (2300 BCE), Indian traders from Indus Valley were active in trade activities. According to Mesopotamian inscriptions they were carrying ivory, hardwoods, pearls, copper, gold, and carnelian to Mesopotamia. Padri is another excavated site that belongs to a mature Harappa period dated 2200 BCE. The Padri people were masters of deep fishing and also involved in production and distribution of salt in neighboring Harappan settlements. Located in the Great Rann of Kachchh on a Khadir Bet, Dholavira was an active port also suitable for anchoring boats. From 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE, the ancient city of Dwarka was the gateway of Indian ships to trade with Cyprus and Syria.

Usually Indian ships were made of Kerala Teak during this period, stitched together with coir yarn dipped in fish oil as Iron was not known. Some ships were square rigged with raked stem and stern on two masts. With the help of two large oars one on each quarter, these ships were steered. Even when there was no support of wind and not making any way through the water, these ships were successfully steered. The oldest known Vedic Sanskrit text, Rig Veda has many allusions about 'Sataritara' or galley with hundred oars. Several commercial sea voyages were mentioned in a descriptive manner in this ancient text. Eighth century Greek poet Homer mentions several articles including Indian Ivory and Indigo traded between India and Greece during 8th and 9th century BC.

India and China both have rich maritime tradition since ancient times. India's geographical location was extremely helpful to have a great foothold in the Indian Ocean Region. From three sides, the Indian side touch the Indian Ocean. In the East Side Bay of Bengal, West Side the Arabian Sea and also from Southern Side the Indian Ocean.

The people of Indus Valley were pioneers in maritime tradition. Even from 2000 BCE to 3000 BCE, there is variety of evidences of India's trade with as distant land as West Asian States. The world's first dockyard was established in Lothal, in Gujarat with well sophisticated planning. From archeological evidences to mythological sources to literary sources, Indian side has direct link with the Indian Ocean region. Indian traders from Indus valley were active in trading of ivory, pearls, gold, cooper etc. Indian ships were travelling to Cyprus and Syria for trade activities. Many foreign texts

also mention India's commercial sea voyages with Indian articles to Greece. The Indian ships that were made during those time were successfully steered even in those conditions when there was no wind support.

China's maritime interactions was a bit late during 5000 BCE to 600 BCE. The earliest evidence of maritime tradition can be traced to 1600 BCE in China. The first sea trade was carried out between Shantung Peninsula and the mouth of the Yangtze. Sea trade was also between the Chinese people and Chinese regions. The Chinese side had no role in any manner in the Indian Ocean region in first phase of maritime interaction during 5000 BCE to 600 BCE.

Chinese got some knowledge about currents and winds only in the 1st Century AD. in the late Han period, the Roman Emperor Aurelius Antoninus embassy was received by the Chinese court (166 CE). The Chinese side didn't have the expertise for maritime trade with distant lands. Their limited interaction was extremely limited to their maritime border. Romans and other foreigners came to China

Emergence of Trade Networks (600 BCE- 300 BCE)

The Shandung Peninsula and Southern Hopei was under the control of Ch'i, during the sixth century BCE. Ch'i state's minister Kuan Chuang encouraged the growth of silk industry and large scale production of salt and fish. They also promoted the river trade, in iron and bronze with South China. Although there is no evidence or little evidence of usage of sea as a trade route by the Ch'i state.

During the fifth century BCE, sea trade was carried out between Shandung peninsula and the mouth of the Yangtze. This first evidence of sea trade

gives rise to the non-Chinese kingdom Wu and Yueh kingdoms. Due to their trade with the north and north west cities of China, these kingdoms became powerful. The support of the Chinese minister who has the knowledge of shipping for prospering trade the non-Chinese Yueh were the first people for trade in the South China Sea.

India's Maritime interaction between 600 BCE-300 BCE:

The period from 600 BCE to 300 BCE was significant for the expansion of maritime trade with many regions. The Arthasastra provides us with valuable information on maritime trade. An entire chapter is devoted to shipping and the management of maritime trade. A mid-level bureaucracy was developed by Kautilya to oversee trade by the Superintendent of Shipping (navadhyaksa). He controlled some kind of naval force to control and suppress piracy at sea. A fleet of ships and boats were maintained by state and was also responsible for construction of ports. For security purposes, fortification of ports along the main water bodies including seaports was important feature. The ports were under the supervision of an official called Superintendent of Ports (pattanadhyaksha). For the smooth functioning of ports, he enacted various rules and statues. The Arthasastra mentions interest rates charged by lenders for long distance trade. Twenty Panas was charged from seafarers.

The Periplus Maris Erythraei mentions sea trade between India and Egypt. Although the trade didn't involve direct sailings but through Aden. According to Megasthenes, the first attested attempt to organize a

navy to protect maritime trade was attributed to Chandragupta Maurya. Emperor Ashoka sends large diplomatic missions to various countries including Greece, Macedonia, Syria, Epirus, Egypt and Cyrene. During the Mauryan period, Malay Peninsula became India's new source of gold after the nomadic interference in Siberia compelled India to search for new source of gold. The Mauryan Empire also witnessed the Indian Ocean integrated to various other regions for trade purposes.

The Indian side was in an advance stage to grow its maritime interactions with foreign states. The Maurya period's Arthashastra was a great treatise on how to conduct a state. The Arthashastra mentions the responsibility of Superintendent of Shipping, Ports and other posts too for active and systematic management of state's maritime vehicle. Even there is mentioning of navy forces to control piracy. The whole Indian Ocean region was used for trade purposes. Foreign traders were continuously coming to various Indian states during this period in large numbers. From Middle East Region to Southeast Asian Region, Indian traders were trading everywhere with diverse kind of goods. Foreign sources like Greeks too mentioned India's sea trade with Egypt.

The first sea trade in China was reported to have begun only in 5th Century BCE. The Non-Chinese Yueh people were the first people who did trade in the South China Sea. In the third century BCE, these Yueh people assimilated in the native Chinese. With this assimilation, this seafaring group became part of China. But there was no trace of Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean from 600 BCE to 300 BCE.

Cultural Interaction and Ocean Empire (300 BCE-1000 CE)

A new Chinese group emerged after the assimilation of the Yueh and Native Chinese during the third century BCE. This new Chinese group were trained to use their boat as carriage and oars as their horses. This NanYueh group assimilated with Han group to emerge and known as southern Han.

The Qin dynasty which establishes the first centralized empire in China was centralizing the entire coast from the Liaotung peninsula in modern Manchuria to the modern port of Ningpo in Chekiang province. After the Qin Empire, Han Empire came into existence as the second centralized empire. During their time most of China's maritime relations was conducted from Xuwen and Hepu. Both these regions are located in Guangdong Province Guanxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

The rise of Buddhism in China was an encouragement for the exploration of the sea routes to the south. The literary records of maritime journeys were completely different from the official archive of diplomatic missions. Through land route, Buddhism entered China crossing Central Asia and Hindu Kush mountain range. This was also the period when the Chinese rule extended into Central Asia with considerable expansion of trade. By the first century CE Chinese has gained some knowledge of the winds and currents vital for navigation. During Han period, Chinese developed trade relations with South India. During the late Han dynasty, the Roman Emperor's embassy visited the Chinese court, posed themselves as ambassadors but they were merchants. Again, in 222 CE Rome's official envoy visited the southern court

of Wu. But these visits happened through sea route, thus establishing the fact that there was thriving maritime trade in this period and foreigners were visiting China.

The later Han dynasty was divided into three kingdoms, of warring Chinese states Wei, Shu- Han and Wu. Wu was the most dominant that captured most of the China and spread to the south of the Yangtze River. For sixty years, the powerful Wu kingdom held them against the attacks of Wei and Shu (220-265) and also of Chin (265-280). Due to these warring states, the Southern coast of China lost its connection with the north. This to these regular conflicts, Wu was compelled to develop trade relations with the countries of Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

Three tribute missions were come to China from Lin-Yi (South of Shangdang province) between 300-400 CE. One mission again came to China from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during 400-419 CE with a beautiful ivory statue of Buddha for the Chinese Emperor. In the time of the Liu Sang Dynasty (420- 479 CE) and the Liang Dynasty (502-557 CE), had fine foreign trade relations with foreign powers. The ships at that time were mainly Indian built ships which sailed between Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

In the initial phase of fourth century, South China lost its control over the Central Asian route to the west. Now, the trade was dominated by the western traders for foreign goods. China had to be dependent on the European traders till 589 CE. Trade relations were prevalent with the western state of Ch'eng Han (304-347 CE), the north western states of Ch'ien Chin (351-394 CE). The commercial relations with these states brought only a limited quantity of goods to

Nanking. To satisfy the high demands of western goods, Chinese merchants started trade through the sea routes, resulting in increasing maritime trade.

Famous Chinese monk Fa Hsien came to India in 399 CE through land route facing great dangers and hardships. He stayed at various monasteries for some years in India and then went south to Ceylon, a center of Buddhism. He sailed to Sumatra with collection of scriptures and other religious scriptures in 412 CE. Finally, after staying two years there, he left for Canton in Chinese ship. Fa Hsien was the first Chinese pilgrim to write a book on his sea voyages with description of the ship and also its capacity to load people.

The short-lived Sui dynasty which was instrumental in reunification of China proper in 589 made active attempts to establish relations with neighboring lands. In 607 CE, the state of Ch'ih-t'u (in Taiwan) was visited by Chinese envoys Ch'ang Chun (Master of Affairs of Military Garrisons) and Wang Chun-cheng (Master of Affairs of the Bureau of Forestry and Crafts). Emperor Yang was so satisfied with this move that he rewarded both officials with 100 bolts of silk.

Cycles of expansion and contraction in Southeast Asian Sea trade was well documented from the seventh century. The volume of maritime trade increased gradually during seventh and early eighth century due to Southeast Asian interest in Chinese goods and Chinese interest in Southeast Asian exports.

During the third phase of maritime interaction, the changed circumstances forced China to slowly start its trade relations with Indian Ocean region. The first factor was due to the Warring states, the Southern China lost its connection with the Northern China. The

Wu kingdom was compelled to start trade relations with the countries of Indian Ocean and South China Sea. The second factor was South China's loss of its Central Asian route. Now the trade was widely dominated by the western traders. These two factors compelled Chinese to start trade through the sea routes with its neighbors. Sui, Tang and later Song dynasties in China made impressive progress in maritime technology including large boats suitable for distant lands.

The Indian progress in maritime trade continued with significant speed. Many regional kingdoms emerged in Western, Eastern and Southern parts of India. In the Eastern coast of India, the Bay of Bengal was mentioned as 'Kalingodra' in 6th century Buddhist text 'Manjusrimulakalpa'. Indicating the importance of Kalinga in the maritime trade, the Bay of Bengal was also referred as 'Kalinga Sagar' or Kalinga Sea. The Gupta Dynasty and Chola Dynasty also made awesome trade relations and introduced their culture to the people whom they traded.

The Indian progress in maritime activities was nothing new because they already had a noteworthy presence in the Indian Ocean. The Indian side was maintaining their position as well as accelerating and opening new areas for cooperation in their maritime trade from all coastal sides. The case of China was different because they were starting and also made some progress in maritime trade in the Indian Ocean region on their own,

Chinese and Indian Empire Emergence and Strategic Empire (1000 CE-1500 CE)

Between the early tenth and mid-thirteenth centuries, there was an increase in maritime trade,

linking the maritime Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. During the Song period (960-1279CE), there was distinction between “fine” and “coarse” goods which continued till Yuan period (1271-1368CE). These goods were taxed at rates of one-tenth and one-fifteenth till 1314. The Yuan dynasty added a small surcharge that was not collected in Sung period. The tax rates were increased to one-fifth and two-fifteenth. The Yuan Government too passed many laws and regulations to stop tax evasion and illegal business-like Song Govt. But merchants and seamen were given preferential treatment through provisions for exemptions. Some of the measures supported development of trade while others caused hindrance. Sometimes, merchants and traders were exempted from the rule due to which trade flourished but other time state’s ban on trade caused barrier.

The major seaports continued to developed and flourished. Earlier Ch’uan-chou and Canton were the important ports located at the southern coast of China through which the trade was carried out. During the transition period of Sung-Yuan, Song power shifted to southern China and north China came under the Yuan control. The port of Ch’uan-chou got greater importance and volume of trade passing through it increased many folds because of the destruction faced by Canton port.

In 1127, Sung shifted their capital to Hangchow because the Chin (also Known as Jurchen Jin) invaders defeated the Song army and captured the emperor (Huizong). The Song had the threat of navy

attack and this way Hangchow was exposed to sea resulting in establishment of Song navy. Song was

forced to rely on the seas due to war and occupation of northern land area by northern barbarians (Jin Jurchen, Khitan and Mongols). The Song administration also dug canals and ditches to regulate internal transportation. All these arrangements gave better defensive system to the Chinese which superseded the enemy cavalry's superiority. The region between the Huai River and Yangtze River needed constant protection. Strong navy was required to patrol these areas and to guard its eastern and western flanks, and Song were succeeded in building a strong navy.

To defeat the Song navy, both Jurchens and Mongols built the fleets but they failed. In 1161, the Jurchens attacked the Song but were defeated and their ships were also destroyed by the Song off the coast of Shantung. The Mongols also thought of attacking the Song by the sea, they dropped their idea in 1268. The Song were compelled to shift to the south due to two main reasons. One was the regular attacks by Mongols and Jurchens and second was the rise of maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. Mongols had powerful land army and Song were not in a position to confront the land army of Mongols. So, Song shifted their attention to ocean which was not much exploited till the time of Mongol's attack. Song focused attention on navy got positive dividends and it excelled to the extent that it could successfully challenge the Mongols and Jurchens attack. At the time of southern Song period, it was the naval phase of wars which was most decisive, during the struggle between Chinese and their enemies in the north.

The Southern Song navy was formed on the foundation led by the provincial Northern Song navy. The Southern Song navy got the art of navigation,

naval architecture, manufacture and the use of fire-arms from the Northern Song navy. It achieved a high degree of efficiency and also victory when the infantry was failing to do so. The Song navy also got support from the large merchant class who provided ships and other supplies. Its personnel were called from the seafaring population of the coast, those men who were trained in naval tradition which they inherited from their forefathers and also trained in naval warfare.

The Southern Song established the first national navy on a permanent basis and functioned as an independent service. It was established in 1132 with headquarter at Ting-hai, it was first navy to be controlled by a special agency of the government, the Imperial Commissioner's office for the control and organization of the coastal areas. The strength and size of the navy fleet grew gradually from 1130 to 1237. In 1130 there were eleven squadrons and three thousand men, in 1174 the number increased to fifteen squadrons with twenty-one thousand men and finally the Southern Song navy enlarged itself to the effective force of twenty squadrons and fifty-two thousand men by 1237. Shanghai which was earlier known as Hsu-p'u, was the largest base, which protected the entrance to the Yangtzi River and the second largest base Ting-hai defended the capital Hangchow. In the first of the thirteenth century, the Song navy was unchallenged in East China Sea. Member of the Privy Council Wu Ch'ien pointed out that: "The area of control of our navy extends westward to Hsu-p'u, southward to Fukien, northward to Korea and eastward to Japan, an area of over ten thousand li. The navy is used for the defense of strategic points." But at the same he also mentioned that the navy was only strong

enough to check the Japanese and Koreans and with some ministers shared the view that the navy needs further expansion. Strong navy was required to attack Korea and use Korea as its base for the seaborne attack on the Chin Empire. But due to insufficient resources and preoccupation with border wars, the Song were not able to bring proposal into reality.

Mongols emerged as the central player after Song to take important step to make navy as an instrument of aggression. They decided to build their navy on the success of the Song achievements. Mongols expanded their naval power by capturing the enemy vessels and building their own ships. Yuan naval forces succeeded in defeating the last Song navy in the battle of Yai-shan with the help of the new ships built in the Kiangsu and Chekiang shipyards. They also got captured Song navy ships, pirate ships, private merchants also provided ships.

The Yuan court started a large-scale shipbuilding program after destroying the Song resistance. The construction of ships increased from fifteen hundred in 1279, three thousand in 1281 and four thousand in 1283. These ships were built in different shipyards in China. The shipyards were in Far East in the Korean province of Cholla-do, far south in Canton, far north in Lung-lu (in northeast Hopei) and Changsha in inland. In the mountain of Jehol, seventeen thousand men were employed to cut trees to supply timber and transport these timbers to the shipyards in different parts of the country. Captured Song officers were also given responsibility to assist in shipbuilding in the shipyards in Korea and China.

The Yuan Government after consolidating their

position in China, did carry overseas

campaigns. With forty-four hundred ships in 1281, Yuan carried invasion on Japan, with eight hundred ships in 1283 on Champa and Tongking, and with a thousand ships in 1239, Yuan carried expedition against Java. To carry grain, tribute and imported merchandise from South China to the capital in north, the Yuan Government also deployed a coastal defense fleet and a maritime transportation fleet. The naval force was the main reason for Yuan dominance that extended from the East to the South China Sea.

China's naval expansion continued even after the collapse of Mongols. Naval power reached its highest point during the Ming period. The period of Ming emperor Yung-lo was regarded as the period when China achieved its maximum strength. Yung-lo navy consisted of a coastal defense fleet of twenty-eight hundred ships to ward off raids by wako from Japan, four hundred ships in central fleet stationed at Nanking, a maritime transport fleet of three thousand ships, and also a fleet of over two hundred and fifty "treasure ships" each with five hundred men.

To collect tribute from rulers as far away as Africa, emperor Yung-lo sent seven expeditions. His most prominent admiral eunuch named Zheng He (1371-1433), led all those expeditions from 1405 to 1433 into the Indian Ocean. These expeditions projected China as the unchallenged naval power in Asian waters only time in history.

Conclusion: India and China are two global powers in the multi polar world and need no validation for their positions at the global stage. Home to a sizeable part of the world population, they appear lucrative to the

Western nations as huge markets. If we look deeper into the past, these same nations have ruled the prominent trade networks since antiquity. From the much coveted Silk road to the maritime network of the Indian Ocean Region, both the civilizations had considerable hold over these important routes. We traced their journey from the beginning of maritime interaction, the state's reaction, the economic impact, and the cultural and traditional development of the region owing to the same. The dynastic political system supported this inflow of remunerative trade and thrived on the gains. Shipbuilding development at a tremendous pace and both the civilizations tried to out do each other.

Although India brought a major religious change in the Chinese society by introducing Buddhism but it was seen as a contender in the waters and both the parties involved were apprehensive about each other's intentions. The maritime interactions traced through the beginning of sedentary lifestyle with the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley region and the Ch's of the Chinese origin attest to the fact that a primitive interaction at sea was taking place since a long time. It developed gradually which has already been discussed by dissecting the long time period into phases which trace these interactions. The Zheng He voyages which are much celebrated in the maritime history are also mentioned which changed the way China looked at the sea. Both the civilizations have evolved at maritime interaction through a long period of time and held their sway over the IOR which in turn shaped the trajectory of the economy, polity and culture of both.

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By this time the trade which was carried by South China through the sea route was lost to the land route which connected north China to the Central Asia and Europe.

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