

### ***Rediscovering the lost track***

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Before India shone, it used to radiate. But it was another sort of light that it shared with others. The great rishi, Sri Aurobindo, wrote at the start of the 20th century: *"This was an invasion of peace and not of war, for to spread a spiritual civilisation by force and physical conquest, the vaunt or the excuse of modern imperialism would have been uncongenial to the ancient cast of her mind and temperament and the idea underlying her Dharma."*

Recently, these words came to mind when I attended an international seminar on "India and Central Asia, Classical to Contemporary Period" organised in Delhi by the ICCR and Astha Bharati.

Opening the seminar, Dr Najma Heptullah, the president of the ICCR, said: *"India has had age-old linkages and interactions with the Central Asian countries. Over the centuries close interaction of ideas, cultural diffusion and continuous exchange of literature, and technology, frequent and human migrations (took place)."*

Several experts from the newly independent Central Asian republics were present. Dr BB Kumar, one of main organisers, emphasised: *"India and Central Asia, with common and contiguous borders, climatic continuity, similar geographical features and geo-cultural affinity, have long traditions of socio-cultural, political and economic contacts since remote past... There has been uninterrupted flow of men, material and ideas between the two."* However, it is striking that the geographical "continuity" between Central Asia and India does not exist anymore. Why is something that was done 2000 years ago no longer impossible?

First, some of the "natural" roads leading to Central Asia (through Afghanistan) were severed by the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Then, two months later, the grabbing by Pakistan of the eastern parts the State of Jammu and Kashmir followed. Gilgit and Baltistan were offered to Jinnah's Dominion by a Major Brown, Commandant of the Gilgit Scouts, who hoisted the Pakistani flag on November 1, 1947, in this strategic tehsil of Maharaja Hari Singh's state. Brown had certainly the blessings of his bosses in Karachi as

a senior British officer commanding a battalion specially trained to guard these strategic outposts could not act on its own, without reference to his hierarchy.

A few years later, one of the greatest (and mostly unknown) foreign policy blunders was committed by Nehru. During the first years of the Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai policy, he accepted without protest the shutting down of the Indian consulate in Kashgar. It was a very ominous decision. The consulate, the gate to Sinkiang, was closed for the simple reason that Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier, did not want India's ageless link with Central Asia to flourish. At the same time, he was keen to open Chinese consulates or trade agencies in Calcutta and Bombay. India could have negotiated the issue and kept the Central Asian road open in exchange of opening the new trade agencies, but the demands of the machiavellian Chinese premier were granted without discussion. India lost on all the fronts.

Nehru had to explain to the Lok Sabha: *"Revolutionary changes took place there (in Sinkiang)... the Chinese Government, when they came to Tibet, told us that they intended that they wanted to treat Sinkiang as a closed area..."* Acknowledging the "revolutionary changes", India complied and lost its trading road with Central Asia which for millennia transited through Kashgar and Yarkand. The severance of India's ageless relations was accepted as a fait accompli. Nehru also cited "the developments in Kashmir". It was totally irrelevant since, after summer of 1948, India controlled the Zoji-la pass and the Ladakh region. The Karakoram Pass leading to Sinkiang was still open to caravans.

Traditionally, trade and culture has always followed the same trails. Today, though there is still a great affinity between the people of India and Central Asia, the physical "continuity" is absent. As a result, trade has reduced to a minimum and cultural exchanges are practically non-existent. Is there a remedy?

In 2003, Defence Minister George Fernandes and External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha visited Uzbekistan. A year before, Prime Minister Vajpayee went to Almaty in Kazakhstan, but despite these efforts, problems of access have not been sorted out. The situation is such that experts thought to get Turkmenistan gas through a pipeline passing Afghanistan and Pakistan. One can understand that Delhi is not too warm about this joint project.

China, very dependent on Central Asian oil and gas, is now planning a railway line from Beijing to Europe passing through Central Asia. It is doubtful that the Chinese leadership would allow India's concurrence in the area accept to reopen the traditional route in the near future.

In case Delhi has a roadmap to solve the Kashmir issue, the reopening of the route through Gilgit through the Wakhan corridor is certainly worth considering. When the "core issue" so dear to General Musharraf comes on the negotiating table, let us hope that the South Block officials will remember the ancient links between Central Asia and its strategic importance and will bargain hard. And, after all, the people of Gilgit and Baltistan are deeply discontented with Islamabad!