

IT'S A CIVILISATIONAL CONFLICT, NOT A BORDER ISSUE

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In these troubled times, when the soldiers of the two largest nations of the world fight and kill each other so viciously, let us try to trace the historical roots of such antagonism. If both nations hark back to a common narrative about Buddhism being a gift from India and both respect the pious Chinese monks who came here on pilgrimage, where does such pent up anger come from? We need to understand first that India and China are not just two nation states and that they are really two of the world's oldest and largest civilisations. This means they are steered by cultural values that go deep into their history. The current imbroglio indicates that somewhere down the line, their civilisational approaches diverged rather sharply.

Once we dig and mine through history and sift relevant facts, we are able to put our finger on the exact period when their paths forked widely and rather irretrievably. It is strange that history books never point to those remarkable decades between 260 and 230 BCE when the root programmes of the two subcontinents were decided upon, and set in stone for ever. We find that the regimes of India's great emperor Ashoka (269 to 232 BCE) and China's first emperor Qin Shi Huang (246 to 210 BCE) shared some a few decades in common. They were located far away from each other and we need to note how completely different their approaches were: to governance, nationhood, the ideals of the state and the role of the ruler and the people.

In his initial years, Ashoka was reportedly aggressive, if we go by the Lankan Buddhist chronicles, but some time after the bloody Battle of Kalinga (circa 260 BC), he became a complete pacifist. On the other hand, Qin (pronounced as 'Chin') had emerged as the first great unifier of the Chinese people through a series of bloodbaths and he kept his sword drenched in blood all through. He lent his name to the unified 'nation' and cut through local variations to develop a common written language for the entire Chinese people.

At this point, the initial divergences become clear between the homogeneity imposed by China's emperor and the heterogeneity encouraged by India's ruler. Ashoka issued well over 30 edicts and inscriptions on rocks and pillars in far-flung corners of his empire and used different languages like Prakrit, Greek and Aramaic. Their scripts ranged from different variants of Brahmi to Kharoshthi

and others. Not only was the language and the messaging modified to suit local cultural nuances and sentiments, even the body was edited to factor in indigenous sentiments. For instance, his thirteenth rock edict expressing remorse for the slaughter at Kalinga was identical in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but it was suitably modified at the sites in Odisha.

Ancient China had no room for local diversity and insists, more so now, that it has to be the same language and script throughout its territory and wonders how India can be one nation with 22 major languages, dozens of other languages and over 600 dialects. Not only was coinage made common in China some 23 centuries ago but even the length of the axle of carts and carriages had to be absolutely uniform. Deviations were punished severely and dissenters were executed, and this spirit is alive even now. Contrast this to the Dhamma that Ashoka propagated as “mercy, charity, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, and virtue” in his Major Pillar Edict No. 7.

When Ashoka prohibited the slaughter of animals as seen in his Major Rock Edicts numbers I and II, he reflected in a way the collective consciousness of the people of this country. It is amazing to note that even the vast majority of non-vegetarians here, whether Hindu or otherwise, eat the flesh of just a handful of animals out of the 8.7 million species, most unlike other countries of the world. The difference is more pronounced in China and according to the Humane Society International, more than one crore dogs and some 40 lakh cats are eaten there every year.

The ‘wet market’ of Wuhan came into the limelight when Covid-19 appeared in that city and among the live animals slashed and cut with knives before customers were bats, raccoons, civets, pangolins, boars, rats, snakes, frogs and dozens of others. The 2009 volume of Entomological Research lists 187 species of edible insects that many Chinese eat and it is common to see roadside vendors roasting and selling insects as delicacies. These include cockroaches (there are farms to breed them), bees, earthworms, locusts, scorpions, dung beetles, crickets, big flies, mantis, grasshoppers and others.

The point is that the basic regard for life that is cherished even by non-vegetarians in India is alien to most Chinese. While India has no record of ever attacking any foreign country, China revels in its history of aggression. We may not have followed all desirable ideals but we feel guilty and know what we should have done. We are schooled to stop at some point—and our diet is just an example. But we confront a civilisation that considers restraint as weakness. The fact is, however, that we have to live with the other culture so we must learn to understand its worldview and adjust our sights and strategies accordingly.