

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This study explores a relatively neglected phase of Sino-Indian relations—that of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, it seeks to do so from a largely unexplored angle, that of the Indian community resident in China during this period. A quick look at the shelves of Indian libraries devoted to Sino-Indian relations would show that they are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the 1962 War, its immediate background, and the aftermath. Studies with a different focus largely tend to general descriptions expressing nostalgia for a golden age of Sino-Indian relations in the distant past, most of them written in or before the 1950s. The full complexity and continuity of Sino-Indian relations thus remain elusive. One could be misled into assuming that, between the golden era of relations based on Buddhism on the one hand, and the highs and lows of Sino-Indian relations in the post-colonial world on the other, these two great neighbours had practically nothing to do with each other.

Recent research has, however, shed light on certain aspects and phases of the Sino-Indian relationship. Studies on trade and diverse forms of cultural interaction between India and China in the pre-modern period, on the Indian mercantile network in pre-colonial and colonial times, and on the inter-connections between the nationalist and anti-imperialist movements of India and China, have gradually fleshed out the picture and helped to correct distorted perspectives. Liu Xinru, Haraprasad Ray, and Tansen Sen, in their work on the trade of China with various regions of India at different periods of time, have shown the

wide-ranging nature and overall continuity of the commercial relationship between the two countries sustained through many political vicissitudes, and also helped to establish that the ties based on trade and those based on religion were closely interlinked.¹ Claude Markovits' work on the merchants of Hyderabad and Shikarpur in Sind, though not confined to their presence in China, illuminates important facets of the economic relationship between India and China in the colonial period, as does Asiya Siddiqi's study of the prominent China trader, Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy.² At another level, Lin Chengjie's general survey of Sino-Indian relations from 1851 to 1949 is without doubt the pioneering attempt to focus attention on the 'dark century' in Sino-Indian relations.³

The present study was undertaken with the conviction that an understanding of what happened between India and China in the colonial era is crucial to our understanding of how the Sino-Indian relationship has taken its present shape. My work was motivated by the belief that a study of the small community of Indians living in China in that era could throw light on the nature and evolution of Sino-Indian relations in modern times. When I first began research on this community, what struck me more than anything else was its 'invisibility'. It undoubtedly existed. Yet, except for passing references, it was by and large ignored, not only by contemporary observers, but by even those scholars and officials concerned most directly with Sino-Indian relations. As a Chinese scholar has recently noted,

'Parsi' is a name that has long been neglected, but Parsi merchants have played an important role in many developments in China's modern history. These developments—such as the opium trade, the Opium War, etc.,—have been thoroughly researched by the Chinese and Western academic world; but the fact that Parsis have been participants (and even important participants) in them has been ignored by the Chinese academic world, while Western scholars also have not done systematic specialized research on it.⁴

What was more, even in the voluminous literature on overseas Indians there was little that had as its focus the Indian community in China. The sole exception was the study by K.N. Vaid of the Indian community in Hong Kong.⁵ As my investigation progressed it became increasingly clear that the 'invisibility' of this particular group was not due just to its relatively small size in

the Indian diaspora. It was equally a function of the prevailing historiography in India, China, Britain, and other Western countries which has equated the activities of the Indians in China in the colonial period with those of the British, on the assumption that the Indians, whether they were traders, or soldiers, or anything else, were 'imperial auxiliaries' and nothing more. It became important, to borrow the words from Claude Markovits, to 'restore the agency' of these Indians and to look more closely at the question of the extent to which they were in fact 'instrumentalized', that is, by investigating the factors motivating them to go to China and the nature of their activities there.⁶

In his work on the American community at Canton in the pre-Opium War period, Jacques Downs has remarked with some irony, 'A perspicacious reader might ask: "Why study any dead community at such length?"'⁷ In the case of the Indian community in China in the colonial period, my answer would emphasize certain features that made Indian traders unique among all the diverse and far-flung Indian groups overseas. First of all, it was distinguished by the preponderance of men of the security services. While other overseas Indians consisted in the main of traders, shopkeepers, and also labourers, nearly half of the Indians in Hong Kong and eastern China were soldiers, policemen, and watchmen. One of the endeavours of the present study is to probe why this was the case, what factors impelled so many men from Punjab, in particular, to seek out a military career in China, and the implications of this phenomenon on Chinese perceptions of India and Indians. Secondly, the Indian community in China was also distinguished by the extent to which it served as an overseas base in the twentieth century for revolutionary nationalist movements and organizations fighting for the overthrow of British rule in India. It has been said that China was second in importance only to North America as an overseas base of radical nationalist activity among Indians.⁸ This is particularly interesting when one considers that the Indian population there consisted of a high proportion of soldiers and policemen, the 'pillars' of British dominance in the Far East. There is a need to understand the reasons for the remarkable transformation of loyalties on the part of these Indians under the impact of nationalism and anti-imperialism, and on the ways in which this affected relations between Indians and Chinese.

Finally, the thoroughness of the dispersal of Indians from the Chinese mainland in the 1940s, and the manner of the dispersal, is also unique in the history of the Indian diaspora. Other Indian emigrant populations that emerged during the colonial era survived decolonization: what, then, were the reasons for the virtual disappearance of Indians from the Chinese mainland? And how did this phenomenon impact upon Sino-Indian relations in modern times?

Starting in the last decades of the eighteenth century, a steady trickle of Indian traders from the west coast of India began to land on the China coast. Their arrival marked the resumption of a particular pattern of Sino-Indian interaction—of Indians travelling to and residing in China—that appears to have altogether ceased after the fifteenth century. The trade carried on by these Indians eventually became a part of the larger triangular trade between Britain, China and India under the auspices of the British East India Company. Meanwhile, another pattern of trade established over many centuries brought other groups of Indian merchants from north-western India across some of the most formidable mountain terrain in the world into Western China.

Nearly half a century after Indian traders began to make their appearance at Macao and Canton, these very ports witnessed the arrival of an altogether separate contingent of Indians—sepoys of the British Indian armies, brought over to fight the battles of the British with the Chinese in the turbulent century that began with the first Opium War. The aftermath of the Opium Wars, and in particular the cession of Hong Kong to the British and the opening of foreign enclaves in the 'treaty ports', led to more Indian migrants arriving as garrison troops, policemen, and watchmen.

Together, the merchant on the one hand, and the soldier-policeman-watchman on the other, made up the basic profile of Indian immigrants in China in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. There were also others, including clerks, a small number of professionals, a handful of political exiles, and so on, but undoubtedly the most representative figures were the Sikh and other Punjabi policemen in Hong Kong and Shanghai and the other treaty ports; the Parsi, Ismaili, and Jewish traders in the same cities, followed later on by the Sindhi businessmen; and the Kashmiri and Hoshiarpuri traders and

Shikarpuri moneylenders in Xinjiang. All of them found commercial or other career opportunities in China attractive enough to make the arduous journey by ship or mule caravan, coupled with residence in an alien environment, seem worthwhile.

The Indians in China did not constitute a large community by any standard. A few hundred in Xinjiang, several hundreds in Shanghai, less than a couple of hundred in the other parts of eastern China put together, and a few thousand in Hong Kong, would be a reasonable estimate for most of the period under review. Except for some Indians in southern Xinjiang, the Indian presence in China was almost entirely urban in nature, confined to the areas of the foreign concessions within the treaty ports. A large proportion either returned to their homes in India at the end of their working lives, or else moved on to other countries, particularly in North America. Nevertheless, Indians seem to have found a fairly secure niche in China. From the end of the nineteenth century, the disproportionate number of adult males in the community began to be balanced out with an increasing number of Indian women and children. Some intermarriage between Indian settlers and Chinese women also took place. In the twentieth century, the number of Indians in China grew steadily until it peaked at about 10,000 in the 1930s. Yet just after attaining this peak, political turmoil and war, the end of colonial rule in India, and the communist-led revolution in China, caused that number to decline sharply. There was an officially-sponsored mass repatriation of Indians from China in the late 1940s. Barring Hong Kong, which developed in a separate orbit from the rest of China after 1949, this meant the virtual end of the century and a half of Indian presence in China.

Along with the physical dispersal of the Indian community from the Chinese mainland, public memory of it also seems to have been extinguished, and neither the scholarly nor the official establishment in India or China has cared to resurrect it. A clue as to why, can perhaps be found in the words of the Chinese poet Xu Zhimo, who wrote in a regretful vein in 1923: 'I dare say when we look at an Indian we do not pity him, we despise him. I think Indians are the most misunderstood people there are; although they are in Asia, too, most people think of them as the same as the red-turbaned Sikh policeman on the streets.'⁹

Xu Zhimo's perception may have been that of a small section of Chinese intellectuals, that too, those with experience of Shanghai or other treaty ports. Nevertheless, this was not an unimportant section of Chinese society, nor does this perception seem to have been atypical of the way Indians were regarded in this period. M.N. Roy, who had first-hand experience of China, wrote in 1926 that because of the large number of Indian troops and policemen in some of the Chinese cities, 'the rickshaw coolies and street urchins stand in greater fear of the Indians than of the English or other foreigners'.¹⁰ In this connection, it would not be out of place to consider what would have been the Indian perception of the Chinese if, for instance, Chinese had for over a century policed or garrisoned cities like Bombay and Calcutta for the British, or if they had fought on the British side in Plassey and other such battles. What is more, there is probably nothing in the Indian experience that corresponds to the degradation and humiliation undergone by the Chinese on account of opium—a commodity which was for a long time the mainstay of the Indians trading with China.

It is perhaps for this reason that little attention, scholarly or otherwise, has been paid to the role played by Indians in China in this period. Apparently, it is in the interests of neither Indians nor Chinese today to recall things which can be painful or embarrassing. An India and a China that are striving to 'normalize' their relations with each other do not need to be reminded about the presence of Indian opium traders or Indian policemen in the foreign concessions in China in the last century. And so the story of those and other Indians in China has remained largely untold.

Yet there is always a danger in letting the imperatives of diplomacy intrude into the writing of history. Realities that are suppressed or thrust aside have an uncomfortable way of resurfacing and forcing themselves on one's attention. Indians and Chinese need to look at the entire experience of their relations in the era of colonialism and imperialism dispassionately, and to come to terms with it. After all, colonialism and imperialism transformed not only the different societies which came under their domination, but also affected the relations between those societies and peoples. The migration of Indians to China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

was one facet of the process of western colonial and imperial expansion, a process that profoundly affected both India and China, in comparable ways. Whereas it is true that Indian traders and policemen made a living as part of a system oppressive or injurious to the majority of Chinese, their individual motives and actions pale into insignificance when seen in the context of powerful historical forces at work at the time. This is not to justify what they did in China, but we need to see things in their historical context. At the same time, a closer examination of the lives of the Indians in China would modify the prevailing image of this community and its role in China.

In a very real sense, the relations between Indians and Chinese are still living down the legacy of bitterness, suspicion and confrontation left behind by the colonial period. One aspect of this legacy is eurocentrism, that is, the mindset that has led different peoples to regard only what came out of Europe or the West as really important, while giving a much lower priority to other societies, and to relations with those societies. For most Indians, China, although recognized as a big neighbour, is 'distant in the public mind'.¹¹ China does not impinge on the Indian consciousness; Indian views of China by and large lack flesh and blood, a sense of involvement or strong feelings. The fact that thousands of Indians, many within living memory, chose to go to China to make a living, to establish businesses and settle down there, that they spoke Chinese and had first-hand experience of China and the Chinese way of life, would come as a surprise to most Indians—and to most Chinese too, for that matter. This is the significance of this historical study.

In this study, the term 'Indians' is used to refer to people of pre-1947 India, specifically to those from the area of the former British Indian empire, excluding Burma. 'China' refers to the territory within the boundaries of the present-day People's Republic of China, excluding Tibet.

This is not a study of all Indians who were in China in the period from 1800 to 1949, but is about the two largest socio-economic groups—the merchants on the one hand, and the category of soldiers, policemen, and watchmen on the other hand. It aims to bring to light the factors that brought them to China and kept them there, their activities in China, the nature of their interaction with the Chinese and with the British in China,

the problems and difficulties they faced, and the factors that eventually impelled them to leave China—in short, the broad range of their experience as aliens in the Chinese environment. Since the merchants in the western regions were quite distinct from their counterparts on the China coast and eastern China, they have been treated in a separate chapter. The political mobilization of the Indian community in the twentieth century has been deemed as significant enough to also merit a separate chapter. As a background to the main subject of this work, it was further felt that it would be useful to deal with the subject of Indians who made the passage to China in pre-modern times, as well as with the phenomenon of Indian migration to different corners of the world in the colonial era, which provided the immediate context for the development of this Indian community in China.

It is unfortunate that the Indians in China who belonged to the major groups which are the subject of this study by and large did not leave any records of their own which would have made it convenient for a historian to document their activities or understand their frame of mind. A notable exception are the records left by the prominent early China trader, Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, housed in the library of the University of Mumbai, although these papers emanate from the period after he had left China. Therefore, following the trail of these Indians has been a challenging exercise, rather resembling the efforts to put together a jigsaw puzzle the pieces of which have been scattered over different cities and countries. My own quest took me to libraries and archives at New Delhi, Mumbai, Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai. The collection in the National Archives of India at New Delhi proved surprisingly fruitful, particularly with respect to Indians in western China. It is still a source of amazement to me that it has been possible to uncover in these places so much information about what I had assumed, at the outset of my research, were a mass of nameless and faceless people about whom little would have been recorded.

NOTES

1. Liu Xinru, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, AD 1-600*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988; Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the*

- Fifteenth Century*, New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1993; Tansen Sen., 'Maritime Contacts between China and the Cola Kingdom (AD 850-1279)', in *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans*, ed. K.S. Mathew, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995, pp. 25-41. See also his 'Gautama Zhuan: an Indian astronomer at the Tang Court', in *China Report*, vol. 31, no. 2, Apr.-Jun. 1995, pp. 197-208.
2. Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Asiya Siddiqi, 'The Business World of Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 19, nos. 3-4, July-Dec. 1982, pp. 301-24.
3. Lin Chengjie, *Zhongyin Renmin Youhao Guanxi Shi 1851-1949* (The history of friendly relations between the Chinese and Indian peoples), Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1979.
4. Guo Deyan, 'Qingdai Guangzhoude Pasi Shangren' (The Parsee Merchants in Canton during Qing Period), unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Zhongshan University, Guangzhou, China, 2001, p. 6.
5. K.N. Vaid, *The Overseas Indian Community in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1972. A more recent work, also focusing on the Indians in present-day Hong Kong, is Barbara-Sue White, *Turbans and Traders: Hong Kong's Indian Communities*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. The new millennium has thrown up two significant studies dealing in whole or in part with the Indian community in China. One is by Guo Deyan, based on a painstaking combing through of the Chinese sources. The other is an article by Claude Markovits, 'Indian communities in China, 1842-1949', in *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842-1953*, ed. Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. 55-74.
6. Markovits, *The Global World*, p. 24, and 'Indian communities in China', p. 71.
7. Jacques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto: the American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844*, Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1997, p. 321.
8. Don Dignan, *The Indian Revolutionary Problem in British Diplomacy, 1914-1919*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1983, pp. 32-3.
9. Cited in Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China and India*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970, p. 241.
10. Sibanarayan Ray, ed., *Selected Works of M.N. Roy*, Vol. II (1927-37), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 574.
11. Amba Bai, *Indian Views of China before the Communist Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Centre for International Studies, 1955, p. 35.