



India, a prisoner of its past

Nehru, Tibet and China

By Avtar Singh Bhasin

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BERTIL LINTNER

There was a time when Tibet was much closer to India than to China. Tibet was largely a closed country, but whatever trade and other contacts it had with the outside world were done through Jelep La Pass in Sikkim to Kalimpong and, further afield, to Calcutta. China claimed Tibet, but its influence was limited to the presence of a representative in the capital Lhasa. What happened? How, and why, did India lose Tibet to China? Avtar Singh Bhasin, a veteran of India's Ministry of External Affairs' Historical Division examines that and related issues in this meticulously researched book. Through careful studies of material at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, which did not become publicly available until 2014, Bhasin concludes that Nehru at an early stage saw India and China as leaders of the post-colonial world. India's independence in 1947 was a clear step in that direction and, when the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, Nehru, as Bhasin writes, "looked forward to working with it" in what he had expected would be an equal partnership.

Mao Zedong, however, declared when he proclaimed his Communist republic that "we shall emerge in the world as a nation with an advanced culture. And one with power". China, alone, wanted to be the dominant power in what later became known as the Third World. Nehru failed to fully fathom this and continued to believe in what in India became a popular slogan in the 1950s: *Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai* (India and China are brothers). Nehru's 1954 visit to Beijing, where he met Mao and other Chinese leaders, and the Afro-Asian Conference that was held in the Indonesian city of Bandung the following year reinforced – at least until Sino-Indian relations turned sour in the late 1950s and then, especially, after the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 – Nehru's vision of the emergence of a non-aligned bloc made up of newly-independent countries where India and China would set examples and provide leadership.

Nehru failed to see the warning signals that should have been clear to everyone when China invaded Tibet in 1950 and annexed it a year later. For the first time in history, China came to share borders with not only India but also Bhutan and Nepal. China now also bordered the Pakistani-held

parts of Kashmir. As the recently declassified documents reveal, Bhasin argues, Nehru's friendship with China had always been one-sided with little reciprocity. Nehru's inability to see the threatening aspects of the rise of China became painfully evident when, in 1954, he recognised China's annexation of Tibet by referring to it as "the Tibet Region of China", and saying that "it is a matter of importance to us, as well as, I am sure to China that these countries have now almost about 1,800 miles of frontier, should live in terms of peace

well as behind closed doors – around Independence and in the years leading up to the 1962 war. Nehru, Bhasin writes, was "pursuing his policies towards China independent of his Cabinet colleagues". In November 1950, after Chinese troops had entered Tibet – and only a month before he died – home minister and deputy prime minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel sent a letter to Nehru warning him of China's long-term designs for Tibet. He also told the prime minister that "while India regarded China as a

Bhasin provides readers with a very comprehensive account of the still unsettled border dispute between India and China, and does it with remarkable neutrality for someone who has been an Indian government official. Nehru might have been wrong in believing in friendship with China and then, paradoxically, in the absolute and non-negotiable nature of the exact position of a border that runs through some of the roughest terrain in the world. Therefore, Bhasin argues, India continues to be a prisoner of its past and has to be more flexible in its dealings with China. But Bhasin, on his part, fails to see the border dispute in a broader, geopolitical perspective, and that is the main weakness of his otherwise excellent study

and friendliness, respect each other's sovereignty and agree not to interfere with each other in any way and not commit aggression on each other".

Nehru also seems to have been oblivious to what the Chinese wrote about him in their propaganda. Bhasin writes that "to start with, Nehru was viewed by the Chinese as the lackey of the United Kingdom and the United States; he was seen as someone representing their imperial interests" in Tibet and elsewhere in Asia. Nehru should also have noticed that "while negotiating the agreement on Tibet in 1954, China was found to be more sensitive to Pakistan's interests than India's". The battle lines were drawn – and then came the 1962 war. China, a communist dictatorship, had defeated the messy democracy that is India, and that would have an impact on the entire region. China had established itself as a dominant and growing power in Asia.

Bhasin describes in great detail what was going on in New Delhi – openly as

friend, China did not regard India as a friend". Patel sent a letter to Nehru stressing the need to deal with China with "the greatest suspicion". Patel dismissed communism as a "shield against imperialism and described the communists as good or as bad imperialists as any other". VK Krishna Menon, India's ambassador to the United Nations from 1952 to 1962 and defence minister from 1957 to 1962, had a more favourable view of Mao and the Chinese leadership and directed the Indian Army "to concentrate on Pakistan while dismissing any threat from China". Those attitudes cost Menon his official posts in the government after the 1962 war.

Bhasin also provides readers with a very comprehensive account of the still unsettled border dispute between India and China, and does it with remarkable neutrality for someone who has been an Indian government official. While the Chinese, at least officially, showed some degree of

flexibility, arguing that the matter could be settled through negotiations, Nehru remained steadfast in his belief of where the boundary should be. India, Bhasin writes, "knew its northern border was not delineated and there was a need for it". Furthermore, even after the exchange of copious notes and Nehru's personal correspondence with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, "his rigidity stood in the way of finding a solution through negotiations and discussions by sitting around a table".

On that point though, Bhasin could be criticised as well. In theory, of course, negotiations and discussions should be the way to solve an issue like the Sino-Indian border dispute. But were – and are – the Chinese really interested in finding a permanent solution to it? Critics would argue that the 1962 war, and subsequent violent confrontations in 1967 and 2017, had more to do with hegemony than border demarcation. In the 1960s, China wanted to dethrone India from its leadership role among the newly independent nations in Asia and Africa and become the sole "bulwark of world revolution". In more recent years, the unsettled border issue – where the Chinese have changed their stance several times and then mostly over the status of Tawang – serves Beijing's strategic purposes. India, clearly, is seen as a major obstacle in China's road to global greatness and reflects the strategic rivalry that exists between Asia's two giants.

Bhasin ends his narrative by providing several suggestions for a solution to the border dispute. It is obvious that India lost Tibet because of a combination of Nehru's belief in the possibility of an equal partnership with China and the faith in his own infallibility which, Bhasin calls rigidity. But Nehru's rigidity may not have been, as Bhasin suggests, mainly in his attitude towards the Chinese – who in any case would not be willing to compromise – but more importantly in the relationship with advisers such as Patel.

With remarkable foresight, Patel even warned Nehru about the possibility of China taking advantage of the hill tribes in north-eastern India, whose allegiance to the Indian state was far from certain. Patel described them as "weak spots with unlimited scope for infiltration with all the elements of potential trouble between China and India". Neither Patel nor Nehru lived to see it, but in the late 1960s China began to arm and train first Naga and later also Mizo and Manipuri rebels. That, again, shows that the border dispute is more than a dispute over borders but one of several outcomes of China's overall aggressive policies towards India.

Nehru might have been wrong in believing in friendship with China and then, paradoxically, in the absolute and non-negotiable nature of the exact position of a border that runs through some of the roughest terrain in the world. Therefore, Bhasin argues, India continues to be a prisoner of its past and has to be more flexible in its dealings with China. But Bhasin, on his part, fails to see the border dispute in a broader, geopolitical perspective, and that is the main weakness of his otherwise excellent study. Nevertheless, Avtar Singh Bhasin's book should be compulsory read for anyone interested in India's troubled relations with China and how the Tibet question fits into the broader paradigm of stability in the entire Himalayan region. ■