

Book Review

A Clash of Political Cultures: Sino-Indian Relations (1957-62)
by Sudarshan Bhutani. Roli Books, New Delhi. 2004
282 p. Price Rs 450/- (HB)

This is a rare book, based on primary/official sources and memoirs of a seasoned diplomat, and it provides incisive information and analysis of a critical phase (1957-62) that shaped the future course of relations between Asia's two giant nations — India and China. The book has ten chapters taking us through the various twists and turns in Sino-Indian relations, starting from fermentation of suspicion around 1957 to the in 1962.

In the setting, Ambassador Bhutani provides the backdrop to China's position in the then international environment as a friendly country committed to a policy of peaceful existence and opposed to the Cold War matrix. In the first part of the book he wonders "how a friendly China, seeking its rightful place in the comity of nations, became a problem for freedom and integrity of its neighbours." The second part deals with the entire gamut of the Tibet episode which actually forms the central theme of the book. The revolt in Tibet and subsequent developments, particularly the confusion over boundary location as perceived by an Indian diplomat posted in the field, fills gaps in the history of the subject written earlier by many experts both inside and outside India. The third part deals with the growing mistrust between India and China arising out of the Tibet issue and resulting in a diplomatic impasse. The author argues that China's belligerent attitude towards its major neighbours and its subsequent international isolation led to the war with India in 1962. The book reflects, towards the end, on the initial formation of a Sino-Pakistan strategic alliance vis-à-vis India which led to the Indo-Pak war in 1965.

The book attempts to reveal facts about the Sino-Indian border conflict and dispels the myths believed for too long that tended to subscribe to Nehru's blunders. At the same time, one wonders why the author chose to write the book at a time when people both in China and India — willing to forget the past — viewed the conflict as an aberration in the two thousand five hundred years of civilisational relationship between the two countries. The book, nevertheless, tries to caution the new generation in Indian about the diligence and carefulness required to deal with China.

Several Indian and Western scholars, using both Chinese and Indian sources, have already written the history of this critical period. In this sense, the book is a retold history. However, it attempts a personal account of the subject based on nuances drawn from personal experience and supported heavily by official sources, particularly diplomatic notes to which the author had access.

Although Chinese disdain for what Nehru stood for in ideological terms is well known, Ambassador Bhutani dwells interestingly on how the Chinese perhaps used the Soviet Academician, P. Yudin, who was then the Soviet Ambassador in China to react to Nehru's 'discursive' thoughts. Elsewhere, the author interestingly cites an observation by one of his Chinese acquaintances on, "how it was inconceivable that a weak country (meaning India), ruled by bourgeoisie which tended to favour 'imperialism' rather than the 'people', could make decisions to suit its own interests."

The revolts in Tibet, Indian reactions and China's response to the issue are analysed in great detail using credible data. It would have been, however, interesting if the author had compared his analyses with those of Western authors using Chinese sources. The author's narration of the Dalai Lama's flight is based on official correspondence. The book leaves no room for doubt that India and China were firmly committed to the non-interference in each other's affairs based on the *Panchsheel*. It, however, fails to explain clearly how and why the Tibet issue was thrust on India to the detriment of its relations with China.

Interestingly, some intimate details have emerged in the recent years about the Tibet episode and the role the CIA played through the memoirs of retired agents. The CIA-inspired secret war in Tibet — an operation code-named 'ST Circus' — is considered as one of the most exotic episodes in the annals of Western intelligence. An in-house CIA study called the secret war in Tibet one of the agency's "most romantic programs of covert action."

Many sources now tend to suggest that Washington on its own initiative promised financial backing for the Dalai Lama — who considered fleeing to the United States — and aid for resistance efforts inside Tibet way back in 1951. A large number of Tibetan Khampa volunteers were trained in Colorado and air-dropped into Tibet between 1952 and 1962. Some recent studies indicate that the CIA even 'channeled' extra-sensory instructions to the Dalai Lama's oracle monk detailing the escape route. The Dalai Lama, however, denies that the CIA had any involvement in his escape and that there was no mystical contact between his oracle and CIA agents. The memoirs reveal how the CIA request to India to grant

political asylum to the Dalai Lama was accepted by Nehru.

The Dalai Lama's escape prompted the Eisenhower Administration to expand its covert-assistance programme. By July 1959, the CIA began using C-130s flying from a secret CIA base in Takhli, Thailand to airdrop arms, ammunition and US-trained Tibetans into Tibet. Between 1957 and 1960, CIA was believed to have delivered 40 drops containing more than 400 tons of cargo to the Tibetan resistance. A book on Tibet entitled *Orphans of the Cold War* by Knaus gives details of CIA operations using the Tibetans. These were of great benefit to the US through valuable Chinese 'work papers' detailing the disastrous effects of the 1959-1961 Great Leap Forward, plummeting morale within the PLA and Beijing's military plans in Tibet. According to the book *Tears of Lotus* by Roger E. McCarthy, who had a long career and was in-charge of the Tibetan Programme for the CIA until late 1961, an estimated 35-40 airdrops were made. Recently declassified US intelligence documents show that the CIA was spending more than US \$1.7 million annually on the Tibet operation.

The book provides, for the first time, a detailed account of the Chinese treatment of Indians, especially the Ladakhi Lamas who were then studying in Tibetan religious monasteries and Kashmiri traders, *Khachas*, residing in Lhasa. Interestingly, the Lamas included spiritual monks hailing from the disputed areas along the Sino-Indian frontiers in Ladakh sectors. Among them was a prominent Ladakhi Lama, Togdan Rinpoche from Changtang.

One would, however, disagree with the author over the argument that China and India were both losers in the game — and the winner was only Tibetan Buddhism, the interest for which has gained global proportion. In this context, it would be right to say that the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has gained personal fame internationally but the side-effect of his celebrity status is that the case of Tibet is becoming more and more apolitical. The attraction for Tibetan Buddhism has helped dissipate the political drive needed to liberate Tibetan people from medieval bondage. In any case, only the desperate ones in the West challenged by materialism harbour fascination for Tibetan Buddhism. It needs to be seen how interest in Tibetan Buddhism gets sustained once the inhumanities of Chinese communism no longer remain the sole issue.

The book is passionate in its approach. It should be useful for the current policy-makers and for scholars engaged in deep research on the subject.

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