

ORAL HISTORY

The “Mao’s Smile” Revisited: Sino-Indian Relations During an Important Period

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Brajesh Mishra, former National Security Advisor and Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister of India recalls his meeting as India’s Chargé d'affaires with Chairman Mao Tse Tung on 1 May 1970 and its larger implications.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you Sir, for agreeing to talk to us for the Oral History section of the Journal.

Basically, we would like to have a better understanding of what exactly happened on the Tiananmen podium on 1 May 1970 when Mao spoke to you. If today the Chinese president, Hu Jintao smiles at the Indian Ambassador in Beijing on 1 May, it would hardly be news. But May 1970 was a very different time. (I was at that time the Under Secretary in the East Asia Division. So I was at the receiving end.) It was an exceedingly bad period of mutual hostility. The 1962 war was still very much with us and then there was the Cultural Revolution with all its hysteria. The Red Guards besieged the Indian Embassy in 1967. They denounced Indians as running dogs of US imperialism and the Soviet socialist imperialists and there was tension all along the border. We had in fact a military exchange in the Sikkim sector. In the midst of it all there came, what has now become famous as “Mao’s Smile”.

What exactly did Mao say to you, Sir when he came to you while greeting the Heads of Missions on May Day 1970 in Tiananmen?

Brajesh Mishra (BM): You know, a brief background would be helpful. Towards the end of 1968, I forget now the exact date, in November or December or somewhere like that, G. Parthasarathy (GP), who was the Permanent Representative of India in New York, had gone to Delhi and he came back and said to me, “What do you think of going to China?”

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Now, since he asked me this question after he had visited Delhi, I took it for granted that some consultations must have been held in Delhi. I said, "Give me a little time to think over it". After a couple of days, I said, "OK, happy to go to Beijing", Peking as it was called at that time.

IFAJ: What was your assignment at that time, Sir?

BM: I was Deputy Permanent Representative in New York. In the meanwhile, GP must have sent a telegram or some other message to Delhi. The orders came that I was going to shift as *Chargé d'affaires* to Peking. So, I left New York on 1 February 1969, came to Delhi and met Mrs. Gandhi. And she said to me, "We are in a box, in our relations with China. I want to get out of that box". This was all that I got as instructions before going to Peking.

IFAJ: I thought, I would just interject here Sir. I was Under Secretary in the East Asia Division and had been tremendously struck by an answer which she had given at the 1 January 1969 Press Conference, where she had made this point, but not so directly.

BM: Yes, fine. I left for Beijing in April 1969 and given her instructions, I began my dialogue with the Chinese Foreign Office once or twice a month, pushing for normalization of relations.

IFAJ: At what level were you received, Sir?

BM: Oh, Deputy Director. I wasn't even received by Han Nien Long, who was the Vice Minister. As a new *Chargé d'affaires* I should have been received by him. But you know, since I was *Chargé d'affaires* ad interim, I said *theek hai* (all right). Given the nature of India's relations with China at that time, I wasn't surprised. Also for a long period there was no Director. This may have been due to the Cultural Revolution or to something else. So this Deputy Director, whose name is, you might have remembered him, Yang Kung Su. He was an expert on Tibet and was posted in Tibet for some years. He was a very nice man and we used to have conversations lasting for an hour or hour and a half, as I said, once a month or something like that, pushing for this. And this went on for a few months. At that point, I remember, T.N. Kaul, who was the Foreign Secretary, told me, "Brajesh why are you engaging in all this?" I had to remind him about the instructions of the Prime Minister. This continued.

Then came May Day, 1 May 1970, and we were all lined up on the ramparts of the Tiananmen and the entire diplomatic corps was there. We waited

there for the Chinese leadership to appear and suddenly we saw Chairman Mao himself leading the Chinese delegation – Mao, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, Li Xiannian and others. Mao went to each Head of Mission to greet them on May Day and of course, the first one was the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the greatest friend of China at that time, Albania! So they had an exchange of a few words and it went down the line. I was almost the last. Just before me was the British *Chargé d'affaires* who was ranked above me. He thought that he would curry some favour with the Chairman and said to him, "congratulations on your sending a satellite". Yes, just before they had sent up a satellite, Long March or something. So he congratulated the Chairman on that. The Chairman with a twinkle in his eyes said, "My regards to Queen Elizabeth and I wish you the same success". And then he moved on to where we were standing and looked at my wife and her *Bindi*. He said "*Indu*" (Indian) and without waiting for me to say anything, he said, "How long are we going to keep quarrelling like this? Let us be friends again". I think these are the exact words he used. Then he said, "My greetings to the President of India and Prime Minister Gandhi". And then of course he passed on. And then food was served, Mao Tai was served, and I waited impatiently there to return to the Embassy and send a telegram that this is what the Chairman had said.

The following day, I went to the Chinese Foreign Office. They gave an appointment immediately with the Deputy Director. I asked him, "Well, where do we go from here?" So he said, "Well, the Chairman has said what we have to say. Now it is for you to respond". He was not going to expand on what the Chairman had said.

IFAJ: Just interrupting for a moment. A reputed Chinese publication has this text of what Chairman Mao is supposed to have said to you. That does not necessarily make it authentic but I will read it to you in any case. "India is a great country and the Indian people are a great people. The Chinese and Indian people are old friends and they cannot always quarrel." This is a translation of the Chinese text.

BM: I have given almost the exact words. I mean, he may have said that the Indian people are great and what not. That was not the big thing. The big thing was "how long are we going to be quarrelling like this? Let us be friends again". I am absolutely sure. In fact, the Ministry has the telegram, and you should be able to check it out on that. Then I waited for Delhi to react. Delhi took its own

time. So I telephoned P.N. Haksar, the Principal Secretary at that time, and I said, "Sir, I want to come to Delhi to discuss this". He wasn't very enthusiastic but when I insisted, he agreed. I think this is going beyond your Oral History project.

IFAJ: No, This is fascinating. This is a very important part of our Oral History Sir.

BM: So, I arrived in Delhi some time in June, eight-nine weeks after what the Indian journalists call "Mao's smile". It was of course much more than a smile. Raja Dinesh Singh was the minister. He and Haksar were not on speaking terms – the usual problem between Principal Secretary and Ministers. But he [Dinesh Singh] was enthusiastic. "This is a very good opening." I spoke to Shesan, the Private Secretary of Indira Gandhi and asked for an appointment with her to discuss our response. Four of us were called to her residence. So I was called there. Tikki Kaul [T.N. Kaul] was present but not his minister [Dinesh Singh]. Swaran Singh was there, who was the Defence Minister at that time and, of course, Haksar. So I said my piece. I said, "We need to respond in a substantive manner. And the best thing would be for us to send an ambassador to upgrade the relations. The Soviets had already done so in 1969. Other socialist countries were doing the same. Why should we lag behind? And we had not withdrawn our ambassador. When G. Parthasarathy left, he left after completing his term. So we had not withdrawn our ambassador, but we didn't appoint a new one. And the Chinese also didn't appoint a new one. And this was now about ten years". So I said, "It is time now to send an ambassador to Beijing and in this way we are responding to what Mao has said, not merely by words but by deeds". And Tikki and Swaran Singh supported me, and Indira Gandhi was also inclined to do that. There was some discussion as to how it would be received in Parliament. Mrs. Gandhi said, "you leave that to me". That means, she was saying that you people need not bother about politics, that's my job. Then Haksar spoke against and he turned the meeting around.

IFAJ: What were his arguments?

BM: He was speaking in a very indirect fashion. And it was only later on I learnt that the negotiations were going on for the Indo-Soviet Treaty at that very time. As you know, this later on came in August 1971. Somewhat later, when I returned to Peking, I learnt from the Chinese that D.P. Dhar, who was the

ambassador in Moscow, was checking with the Chinese whether they were serious or not. Yes, I am pretty sure that Mrs. Gandhi didn't know anything about that. Must be Haskar and D.P. Dhar. So the meeting ended in Mrs. Gandhi's residence and I was told, "You carry on the dialogue". I said OK, what else I could do? Then I went back. But the Chinese did not give up. They remained very cordial and their propaganda against India subsided. They were hopeful that something would happen. So much so that, when Mrs. Gandhi went for mid-term elections in February-March 1971 and she was re-elected I was at a reception given by Zhou Enlai for a Nepalese dignitary. I forget now, he was Prime Minister or Speaker, whatever it was, I don't know, but Zhou Enlai gave a reception for him and Zhou Enlai came round to all the Heads of Mission. When he came to me, he said, "my congratulations to Mrs. Gandhi for her victory and her re-election as Prime Minister". The interpreter fumbled slightly. So Zhou repeated it in English. So even then, which was almost a year after, they kept at it.

IFAJ: So clearly from this, in your judgement, it is not that Mao said something just on the spur of the moment as a diplomatic nicety. You feel that it was a substantive statement of their intended policy. But this was the period when there was strong Chinese support for the Naxalite movement, and all the insurgencies in the Northeast. Every other action, before this statement, seemed to be anti-Indian. We find all the time people analysing India-China relations only from a negative perspective. I am sure Mr. Haksar had a formidable list of what the intelligence agencies would have told him of what the Chinese were up to. Is it that Mao was now concerned about the direction which the Sino-Soviet relations had taken, something which made him move towards the rapprochement with the US? Was this initiative towards India also a part of an overall fresh strategy, that it was really not in the Chinese interests to have this huge, dark area in Chinese foreign policy?

BM: Yes, of course. I have no doubt in my mind that with the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Brezhnev Doctrine, and then the clash along the Ussuri, Damansky island, which was a very serious clash, China decided to balance the Soviet Union in its relations with it, and India was a part of that, apart from the US. When Mao said ... his slogan was: "We have friends everywhere in the world", it meant that they were seeking friends everywhere in the world. This was his way of putting it. So, there was a decision taken to open

up relations with as many countries as possible. They were pretty sure that they couldn't move the socialist camp apart from Romania and Albania, of course. They saw the possibility of moving India. Also on 1 May 1970, just before that, Nixon bombed Cambodia. And it is my understanding that ... the *White House Papers* should indicate that ... the Chinese stepped back slightly from the US at that point of time. They were worried about this. There was also a coup in Cambodia. Prince Norodom Sihanouk went into exile and lived in China. All this happened around the same time. So you are right, there is a relationship between this and the deteriorating relations between China and the Soviet Union. At the same time, you should keep in mind that Kosygin and Zhou Enlai met in October 1969 at the airport when Kosygin was returning from Hanoi. And they took two decisions: one, to restore the ambassadorial relations and two, to open border negotiations between China and the Soviet Union. So what they were trying to do, some of this is hindsight, is to expand the space for their strategic options. Not to be hemmed in by the Soviets and by India in the south, they were trying to take India along with them.

IFAJ: According to my recollection, because of all else that China was saying and doing in relation to India at that time, there was great scepticism in India about what Mao said to you and the term "Mao's Smile" was coined by the Indian media almost as a term of fun. Is my recollection right Sir?

BM: Well, it could be. After all, there was a briefing going on from some quarters ... Mrs. Gandhi had told me that she wanted to get out of this box in our relationship with the Chinese. But Haksar and D.P. Dhar had a different kind of view. Whether it was connected to the Chinese actions in India or it was due to their leanings towards the Soviet Union, I don't know. Till March 1971, Zhou Enlai was still very hopeful when he said, "My congratulations to Mrs. Gandhi", etc. Within a few weeks the whole thing changed. Yahya Khan unleashed terror in Bangladesh and the Chinese were pretty sure that it would lead to some major problems between India and Pakistan. And the Chinese began to hesitate because they did not want to abandon Pakistan.

So this went on for sometime. Kissinger arrived in July or August of 1971, China occupied a seat, a rightful place in the UN, became a permanent member of the Security Council.

Now, and this is important, there were apprehensions that in a war between India and Pakistan, China might do something. At the end of August 1971 and after the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty, I came to Delhi and met P.N. Haksar, who had by then taken over as Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission and P.N. Dhar was appointed as Principal Secretary. I met D.P. Dhar and I said, "Look, in my view, you should still make a move towards China. Because, if a war comes and I think a war is imminent, then you would become even more beholden to the Soviet Union. And then the Chinese would feel that there was no way India would act against the wishes of Moscow. So it is in the interest of the country to make a move before the war". P.N. Haksar said, "No no no, Brajesh this should not be done". D.P. Dhar was even more critical about it. He said, "Why do you want us to bend to China?" So I said to Haksar, "I will take my case to Mrs. Gandhi and convey my message to her". He said, "Yes of course, it is your right".

So I wrote a letter to Mrs. Gandhi giving these arguments. She called me a couple of days later. P.N. Dhar was there. This was the first time I met P.N. Dhar. She [Mrs. Gandhi] said to me, "What is it that you propose?" I said, "It is very simple. You are going to be heavily dependent on the Soviet Union in case of a war between India and Pakistan. There is no doubt about that. Whether it is arms material or it is the Security Council. And then you will feel more obliged to the Soviet Union. And all these arguments of not doing anything in relation to China so as not to displease the Soviet Union will be strengthened. So before there is a war, you must make another move to China." So she said, "What do you have in your mind?" I said, "I will go there and I will say that we have decided to send an ambassador to China. And while saying this in Parliament, we will say that we have no reason to believe that the Chinese will not reciprocate. This is all". "What will this achieve?" she asked. I replied, "The Chinese will know that we are very keen to have normal relations even after having signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty. And this they will know before a war". She said, "OK, you go and draft something". So P.N. Dhar and I went to the office of the Principal Secretary, which I occupied so many years later, and I drafted something. I insisted that I needed written instructions and could not proceed without them. It was too tricky.

I returned to China and as it happens so many times, the situation was actually bizarre. Lin Biao had attempted his coup, he tried to flee in an aircraft,

he was shot down. Who shot the plane down or whether it crashed for lack of fuel, I don't know. What ever it is, the Chinese leadership was very busy. I was received in the Foreign Office and I met the Deputy Director I am now not sure whether it was the Deputy Director or the new Director Lin ... who said, "this is a very good idea". So I said, "you think about it and we will talk later". But the leadership was fully engrossed in this Lin Biao affair. This was in September. In October, they occupied the Chinese seat in the UN and began to function as a permanent member of the Security Council – by that time the war clouds hovered over South Asia. So, the Chinese could not, at that time have said to me, "go ahead", because Pakistan would have felt betrayed.

I went on talking to the Foreign Office. I wanted to assess China's reaction to the impending war. A few days before the war began, 30 November or 1 December, I forget now, I asked the Director, "What are you going to do?" He could not be indiscreet or anything like that. After about forty or forty-five minuets of sparring, I ended the conversation. He came out to see me off at the steps ... my car was there...as we were approaching the steps he said to me, "Mr. *Chargé d'affaires* need not worry. China will act in accordance with international law". What more assurance could we want? And now we know that at this point of time, when he said this to me, the Americans had been pushing China to take some action on the border against India. The Chinese said, "No". Why? Did it have something to do with our going and saying to them even after the Indo-Soviet Treaty that "Look we want to normalise relations" and they didn't want to shut the door completely. Suddenly China had become a very responsible country after becoming a permanent member of the Security Council. I don't know, but I am merely saying that they did not want to take steps which would exacerbate the situation between India and China while at the same time they wanted to keep supporting Pakistan, you know, diplomatically, verbally even giving supplies what ever it is, but not direct action on their part as Kissinger was urging them to do. You know, *White House Papers*, which came out last year. And it was at that moment that the Director was saying to me, "Mr. *Chargé d'affaires* need not worry; China would act in accordance with international law".

IFAJ: Till when you were in Beijing Sir?

BM: I was there for another eighteen months. I left in August 1973.

IFAJ: So during the whole of the Bangladesh war and the Nixon visit?

BM: Yes. Four years later, Mr. Narayanan went as ambassador with the same formula, the same formula which I suggested at that time – we send ours first and they send theirs after that.

To conclude this, the Mao thing was a well thought out calculated move. And the main reason for that, I can't say that the only reason was to see that India did not go into the pocket of the Soviet Union. In fact one of the Chinese, I forget now who, said this to me later. I responded, "Look, you are a big country and we are a big country. Can you be in the pocket of somebody? We can't be in the pocket of somebody either." But they had this apprehension.

IFAJ: Not only them. At that time, I moved from the East Asia division to Tokyo and this was the Japanese obsession – the danger of India going into the Soviet camp.

BM: You know, Mrs. Gandhi didn't want to remain beholden to the Soviet Union.

IFAJ: Sir, you left Peking in 1973, then you went out for other important assignments and of course you must have interacted with the Chinese at the UN and elsewhere. Years later you became Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Vajpayee and Special Representative nominated by him to negotiate the border issue with the Chinese. I just want to know – in terms of the Chinese sense of history – whether any of the Chinese ever recall this episode?

BM: Yes, everywhere, always, even today. ...“He is the man to whom Mao spoke.”

IFAJ: So it remained a part of Chinese consciousness on the issue...

BM: Yes. You know, when I went to the UN as Permanent Representative (PR), this was in 1979, six years after I left Beijing, the PR of China, I forget his name now, came to me at one of the receptions, and said, “You knew Chairman Mao and we know that you are a great friend of China”.

IFAJ: One last question. Do you think that when you negotiated with the Chinese as a Special Representative, in some way your experience as the *Chargé d'affaires* at that time, had a major impact on your thinking about how you saw the Chinese, the Chinese perceptions and what the Chinese really wanted to do with India?

BM: Yes, I mean, one thing which came to mind when we went to China was Mr. Vajpayee's visit to Peking as Foreign Minister in 1979. Then Deng Xiaoping spoke to him about settling the border. That was on our minds. So I didn't find it very strange when the Chinese reciprocated immediately when we made this suggestion to have a special representative and to look at the problem of the border in the overall context of our relationship. It was obviously indicating compromise on both sides. They jumped at it. And you will be surprised, within two or three hours, Wen Jiabao, who must have consulted various people, asked, "Who is your special representative?" ... "He is our special representative." This all happened within a few hours and the Chinese assisted in this happening.

IFAJ: In conclusion, we would be grateful to have your concentrated wisdom on how China sees India. You know, there is a school of thought in India, putting it rather crudely, who believes that China is a kind of monster, demon who has got very deep strategic plans to totally undermine India, if not actually physically take over, and who has a huge plan of encircling India, so on and so forth. Then there is the other school of thought, which would say of course China as a rising power, behaves as an ambitious major power. It is not a country of saints – it makes sure that its interests are well protected in negotiating with anybody and certainly with India but it works out reasonable, sensible arrangements and is willing to do so.

BM: Why don't you relate it this way? We have already discussed the reason why Mao made this move. When Deng Xiaoping made the same move, he was saying that "I want peace on all my borders for us to develop". And that still holds good. They want peace on their borders. They don't want a conflict. The last conflict was in 1979 when they foolishly attacked Vietnam. Why don't we go with what Deng Xiaoping has said very clearly: "For us to develop, we need peace on our borders"? Makes sense. Whether the Chinese have some ulterior designs or they are thinking of something else that's an academic question. What is clear today is that they don't want conflict on their borders. We should take advantage of that.

IFAJ: Thank you very much Sir. We have taken a full hour of yours and this is an important historical document.