

ORAL HISTORY

Engaging China: The Call of History

Lakhan Lal Mehrotra

Lakhan Lal Mehrotra, was the Chargé d' Affaires at the Indian Embassy in China in 1976 when the two countries decided to normalize relations by resuming exchange of Ambassadors. Having been 'involved' with China since the 50s, he recalls his experience of Sino-Indian relations during 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you Ambassador, for agreeing to talk to us for the Oral History section of the Journal. You have vast experience of dealing with China, so many significant aspects of our engagement with China. We are sure you can throw considerable light on not very well known aspects of India's policy and India's interaction with China.

Lakhan Lal Mehrotra (LM): Well. It is a pleasure to talk on this subject. It has been very close to my heart. As a matter of fact, in 1955 when India was sending its first Cultural Teacher-Student delegation to the PRC, I had just done my Masters at the University of Allahabad and I was selected to represent the University, on this national delegation of India led by Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. I had then the occasion to establish my first contact with China. I have warm memories of that visit which took place in the aftermath of the 1954 agreement, and the signing of Panchsheel – five principles of peaceful coexistence with China. That was the heyday of the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai relationship and there was great excitement on both sides. Both countries wanted to build on the historic bonds between the two nations in the context of Prime Minister Nehru's dream of a resurgent Asia in which India and China would play a major role. India was looking forward to furthering the ties that took us back to thousands of years and establishing a new edifice of relations based on them. We visited a number of China's cities and historic sites over a period of about two months starting with Canton, Shanghai, Peking and the Great Wall of China. In Peking (now Beijing) the pageant of billboards and banners welcoming us was simply overwhelming.

Mr. Zhou Enlai personally met us a couple of times. We found him a man of great charm and attraction and love for this great bond between India and China. He was full of enthusiasm about our future relationship just like our own Prime Minister. He accorded to us a very special gesture, a rare one which was demonstrative of China's desire to build close relations with India when he invited our entire delegation of some 30 professors and students to his residence for tea. There was yet another gesture, equally special and important extended to us. As we were passing along the Forbidden City as part of a huge group of about 200 foreign delegations during the 1st October celebrations at the Tiananmen Square, we received word that we should come to the dais. We were singled out to be taken to the platform from where Chairman Mao and other Chinese leaders were witnessing the endless row of processions. Mao Zedong then came forward, shook hands with each of us, exchanged greetings and expressed great happiness at our presence on their national day in China. For many of us, straight out of our universities in India, full of dreams and ideas, it was an electrifying moment and we were all charged with emotion. It was a unique kind of an experience. Our entire visit passed like a moment, packed with joy and the warmth of Chinese hospitality. I must admit however that as we were leaving, we came across a couple of articles in the Chinese press, which made us rather anxious about the situation that was developing in Tibet. There was harsh criticism against His Holiness the Dalai Lama who was highly revered by the people of India.

IFAJ: Do you remember which paper carried the piece?

LM: I think it could be the People's Daily or the Xinhua News Agency. We read their English version. That had alerted us and made us wonder whether trouble was brewing again in Tibet. India had felt relieved when the 17-point Agreement had been signed in 1951 between China and Tibet. Tibet was thus established as an Autonomous Region of China. When the matter had come up before the UN in 1950 at the request of the Dalai Lama, asking it to intercede against the entry of Chinese troops into Tibet, India had assured the UN that a peaceful solution would be found through negotiations. In light of the Sino-Tibetan 17-point Agreement, India also recognised the status of Tibet as an Autonomous Region in 1954.

IFAJ: Was it referred to as an autonomous region of China?

LM: Probably yes. I can look into that again. That was the time when China was consolidating its boundaries on the basis of "ancient claims". Under an

agreement with China, the Soviet forces had already withdrawn from Manchuria just as India withdrew its tiny contingents securing lines of communication with Tibet from the British times. We continued to function from Lhasa as a Consulate-General. On 1 October 1955, when we were there and there were hundreds of other delegations from the world, the Chinese declared that the unification of mainland China was complete with the jurisdiction of the People's Republic extending to Xinchiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet.

IFAJ: So your engagement with China started much before your foreign service?

LM: That's why it stands out as a unique experience. I joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1958. That was the time when Indian Foreign Service candidates were personally interviewed by Prime Minister Nehru.

IFAJ: Even after the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) exam?

LM: Yes, after the UPSC selection process was over. Prime Minister Nehru asked me why I proposed to join the Indian Foreign Service after having studied Sanskrit, Ancient History and Culture and having taught Ancient History at Allhabad University? I replied, "Sir, because the Indian Foreign Service offers me a unique opportunity of witnessing first hand so many cultures of the world". That was the end of my interview. Just one question, probably he was satisfied with my answer. I had taken with me a copy of his latest publication, *A Bunch of Letters*, which the Prime Minister very kindly autographed for me and I keep it as one of my most cherished possessions. After that interview, a foreign language was to be assigned to each of us. I was told by the Foreign Secretary later that Prime Minister Nehru had marked "Tibetan" against my name because of my Sanskrit background. So I went to Sikkim to study the Tibetan language at the Institute of Tibetology by way of preparation for a posting to the Consulate General in Lhasa. However that was not to be.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself crossed into India in 1959 in the wake of the uprising in Tibet. After I passed my advanced exam in Tibetan in 1960, it was decided to post me to Dharamsala as the Government of India's Liaison Officer with him. Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh was at a remove from the Indo-Tibetan border and yet offered natural surroundings in which His Holiness could feel somewhat at home. Though no place on earth could

ever be like home to him. The situation along India's border with Tibet at that time was quite tense. There were some Chinese troop movements along the Indian border which created considerable uncertainty about Chinese intentions and had left India very uneasy. Some of the Chinese soldiers had crossed the border posts, recognised even in the 1954 agreement as border posts such as Barahoti for trade with Tibet and there was great tension in the air.

IFAJ: Coming back to Dharamsala, were you deputed for the Government of His Holiness?

LM: No, we did not recognise Dalai Lama running a government in exile but the Dalai Lama had to have an Indian representative with him to help him settle down. Initially, the Tibetan Camp at Dharamsala had no electricity, no assured source of water supply and no telephone lines. The approach road even to Swargashram where His Holiness was lodged was just a pony track. The camp had a temporary look but the Dalai Lama took it all in his stride, while the Government of India accelerated the rehabilitation process, and necessities for a modicum of comfort were provided fast. There was no way of determining how long he would stay there, and how the matter would be sorted out with the Chinese Government. However, he always kept his hope alive of a return to the land of his birth and of his forefathers. So, the Government of India established a liaison office with him to oversee the rehabilitation work and to remain in touch with him and to ensure that no harm was done to him. That was a major responsibility that had devolved on the Indian government.

I was very impressed by many facets of the Dalai Lama's personality, especially the maturity he displayed well over his physical age of 25. There was no trace of bitterness in his heart for the Chinese people which only a high level of spirituality could explain. He mentioned that in 1956 when he had come to India to commemorate Buddha's 2500th anniversary at India's invitation, he had undertaken a visit to Mahatma Gandhi's Samadhi and had felt a powerful impact of the Gandhian spirit on him including the apostle's gospel of non-violence.

Meanwhile, the situation at the Himalayan border of India was becoming increasingly tense, even alarming. In 1960, Zhou Enlai came to India to discuss the issue. The Chinese Premier said that they had had no time yet to revise the maps which were there from the Kuomintang days and the matter could be

sorted out peacefully through negotiations. That was also our position but they never gave any timetable for revising them nor for withdrawal from the advanced positions their troops were busy occupying and nibbling at what India was convinced was her territory.

IFAJ: There is a belief that the Chinese never wanted to discuss the issue on the basis of maps.

LM: The Chinese wanted to sidetrack the McMohan line as such, not recognising any “colonial” or “imperial” treaties but that was the very foundation of India’s claims on the border. The Chinese maintained that the McMohan line was ambiguous and not “clear”. It is possible that they did not have any specific idea as to where exactly the border lay. They were dealing with an evolving situation and moving as far forward as they could but that created an unacceptable situation for India.

There was never any Chinese military presence along the Himalayas for thousands of years and India was now dealing with an entirely new phenomenon impinging gravely on its security. The Indian Parliament was quite rightly exercised over the matter. In 1962, the situation took a difficult turn. India felt deeply provoked by Chinese activity along the border and started taking some corrective steps like building roads and border pickets but it was a huge and time-consuming task. Our forces certainly did not have the wherewithal to defend more than the 2000-kilometre-long Himalayan frontier as the Chinese came sweeping down in simultaneous attacks in all three sectors, the western, the middle and the eastern sectors and our forces suffered serious reverses.

Right at that time, the USA and USSR were caught up in the missile crisis in Cuba and the Chinese took full advantage of it since neither of them could readily come to India’s rescue. However, while India was examining the options available to it and exploring ways to meet the unprecedented situation, the Chinese decided to unilaterally withdraw their forces a few kilometres back from their actual positions.

I was on my way to the United States on a posting to New York from Dharamsala at that time. By then I had witnessed both phases of India’s relations with the People’s Republic of China – the golden era of Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai and the border conflict when those relations touched their nadir and both sides withdrew their ambassadors from the two capitals respectively, freezing diplomatic relations at the level of Chargé d’Affaires. However

history does always provide you with opportunities where such situations can be remedied. I remember that a decade later when on my return from the Soviet Union I was posted in the Northern Division of our Ministry, dealing with the border region and countries in our neighbourhood like Nepal and Bhutan, it was felt that the moment was ripe for initiating steps for a normal relationship with China. I was myself a votary of that change in policy.

In 1973 I was posted to China as Chargé d' Affaires and I had that mission at heart. I have had the opportunity of observing China from New York from 1962 to 66 and I had seen USA and PRC viewing each other with blood-shot eyes. In the next three years I had the opportunity to observe China from Moscow when tensions between Beijing and Moscow had resulted in an outright military clash along the Ussuri River in the Siberian region converting communist comrades of yesteryears into sworn enemies. That made the US pry on opportunities to woo China. The international chess game was undergoing a radical shift. Nations in the fray were coming closer; friends were falling apart. Could India and China then not do something to move away from friction and conflict to a more constructive relationship, however piecemeal?

IFAJ: So you had experienced all the perspectives?

LM: I had seen Soviet-Chinese friendship touching its highest peak in 1950–55. The Sino-Indian relationship reached its peak in 1954–55 and then I had seen these relationships decline drastically in the 1960s. This global perspective helped us to see how our relations with China could be shaped towards a better future.

I was asked to draw a couple of points for the Government of India to consider as to what could be done to move towards better relations with China which I did and I received a go-ahead. When I called on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi before my departure for Beijing in 1973, she said India wanted good relations with China, not because India was weak but because that was the call of history; that she had a dream of China and India working together for the peace and prosperity of Asia and for making contributions to world peace; that the dream had not come true despite India's earnest efforts and in between the relationship had suffered a setback which neither of them wanted. It would be good to try to come out of that bind. Mrs. Gandhi was prepared to approach that relationship with an open mind but the Chinese leadership should know

that a change was possible if both sides respected each other as sovereign and independent nations. India would not compromise her dignity or self-respect to achieve the desired change. She also said that one should start with small steps.

IFAJ: She wanted normalisation but no compromise. Is that so?

LM: Yes. She wanted normalisation but no compromise on principles of India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. She wanted India's Representative to represent India in that spirit always and yet keeping a window open to move forward. Throughout my three years in China, that brief was my guiding light. My arrival in China was pro forma. The Chinese were not looking with great enthusiasm towards my posting but gradually they adopted a posture of cautious warmth as they noticed my moves and made subtle hints that if we were prepared to take a fresh look at our relations, they would not be found wanting.

My meetings at the Foreign Office were pleasant initially but when we came to brass tacks sometimes heat was generated. That was natural as both sides had their own positions on all contentious issues. However, at the upper levels of Foreign Minister and Deputy Foreign Minister, I received quite a lot of encouragement, especially when Mr. Chiao Kuan-hua became Foreign Minister. He was known to be close to Premier Zhou Enlai and his wife, Director in the Foreign Office who for a while handled South Asia, was said to be occasionally acting as interpreter for Chairman Mao Zedong.

It was clear to me that China was prepared for what Mrs. Gandhi had called "small steps" towards normalisation. The opportunity arose when the Chinese Government organised a Tri-Continental Sports Festival and I was told that India should think of sending a sports team. No formal invitation was extended till then but the Chinese had created a window of opportunity through their informal sounding and that suited us. The reply from India was that India looked at the suggestion favourably but would act only on receipt of assurance that they would reciprocate when we invited their team to an international event in India. The Chinese responded positively. So we sent a sports team to their Tricontinental after all the necessary formalities had been observed. When a few months later an international table tennis tournament was organised in Calcutta, the Chinese fulfilled their promise.

IFAJ: This was the beginning of Ping-Pong Diplomacy ...

LM: Yes. This was the first breakthrough. When the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister whispered to me and said, "Why don't you travel with our team to

Calcutta?" I replied in the negative, since I did not want to avail myself of their hospitality and travel free of charge in their aircraft even up to Honk Kong. I must give credit to the Chinese Government however for having their team led at a political level by the Deputy Minister of Sports. I promptly organised a meeting for him with his counterpart in the Government of India so that after the tournament in Calcutta he could visit Delhi and hold political level talks. He returned from Delhi fully satisfied and with the right messages for the future of our relations.

Soon, however, there were problems. Mr. Bhutto came to Beijing on a formal visit. The Chinese had told me that they welcomed the Simla Agreement which provided that all matters would be sorted out between India and Pakistan through bilateral negotiations including the question of Jammu and Kashmir. That left no scope for a third party to interfere. I was therefore shocked when Mr. Deng Xiaoping raising the toast in honour of Mr. Bhutto on behalf of Premier Zhou Enlai, who was unwell, referred in his statement to China's support for the right of self-determination for the people of Jammu and Kashmir at the banquet in the Great Hall of the People.

So I walked to the dais and then with a slight bow I left as a mark of protest. Since my gesture had both courage and courtesy, several Ambassadors later congratulated me for the manner of my walkout. However, in his reply to the Chinese toast, Mr. Bhutto exploded and even threatened to get me expelled from the Indian Foreign Service by his "sister Indira" for my "juvenile delinquency". Prime Minister Gandhi, on the contrary, defended me to the hilt when the episode arose in the Indian Parliament for discussion. She argued that India wanted to settle differences with both China and Pakistan peacefully and through negotiations but when it came to matters of national integrity, India's Chargé d'Affaires did in Beijing what he ought to have done. That would have shocked Mr. Bhutto. He made amends at his own return banquet when he walked to our table and spoke in a friendly tone to both Sheela and myself.

A year later when Mr. Bhutto revisited Beijing, I went to the Chinese Foreign office and said, "Look, if you invite me as you did last time to the Banquet Hall and if you do the same thing, I will have to do the same thing as last time. I don't want to disturb the ongoing process of improvement in our relations". The Chinese said, "We have a fixed position on the subject (J&K) but since we have been repeating it for years, India should not look at it as a

special move against it. And then what you do will be your business and what Mr. Bhutto will say will be his but it won't leave any ill feeling behind between us".

However this time, the Chinese had a surprise waiting for me, indeed a very pleasant surprise. While I was waiting with other Heads of Missions at the airport to receive Mr. Bhutto, I received a gentle tap on my back from Premier Zhou Enlai. He had shaken hands with the Heads of Missions including myself and then reverted to me with a remark which he almost whispered into my ears and which permeated the core of my being. He said: "Please tell Indira, everything will be all right". He did not say "your Prime Minister" but used her first name with a deep touch of familiarity and affection. This message was pregnant with meaning. In our talks on the normalisation of relations, Premier Zhou Enlai had not so far intervened. The talks had been held thus far at the level of Foreign Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister and Head of the South Asian Division.

In reply to the Premier's gesture, I simply said, "Sir, thank you very much. I am honoured to meet you again. I had met you in 1955 as well". He gave me a warm hand shake and then went to receive Mr. Bhutto whose plane had just touched down. Premier Zhou Enlai's message was a signal that both countries could take more significant steps in improving their relations and I felt rather proud to convey it to its distinguished destination. When I asked the Chinese Foreign Office to please interpret it for me, it was suggested that the two countries could move towards exchanging Ambassadors again but India would have to be the first to send their Ambassador. It was pointed out that in the 1960s it was India that had withdrawn its Ambassador first and the Chinese recalled theirs only after that.

In my consultations in Delhi on the subject, I was told that India would agree to the Chinese suggestion if they reciprocated within a matter of days after the Indian Ambassador was in place in Beijing. The Chinese Chargé d'Affaires in Delhi was also briefed on the same lines. The Chinese assent did not take much time to come. I was very happy at this turn of events. A few months later, Premier Chou Enlai died but before his death an agreement had been reached between India and China to restore normalcy to their diplomatic relations and open the door for a renewal of relations. That must have given him some satisfaction.

My mission was thus over and I left Peking in June 1976 with a sense of

fulfilment. I was followed by Ambassador K.R. Narayanan a few months later. His arrival marked a new page in the history of Sino-Indian relations.

IFAJ: Thank you so much for reviving those pages of history, which many people are unaware of.
