

ORAL HISTORY

Indians in China: The Most Honoured Guests

Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea

Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea, who joined the Indian Foreign Service, in 1957, served in the Indian Embassy in Peking (Beijing), till 1960, after which she resigned from the Foreign Service, to teach at the Delhi University. She then went on to found the China Study Group and the Institute of Chinese Studies in New Delhi.

She recalls her interaction with the Chinese and the courtesy, ambience and warmth in the Sino-Indian relationship during the 1950s that dramatically changed during the 1960s..

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you, Miraji, for talking to the Journal. You have served in China and you must have many interesting experiences of that period. We would be very grateful if you share your experiences with the Journal.

Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea (MSB): Thanks for asking me. I am very happy, as it would help me to revive my memories. That was a very interesting period when I was posted there. I went to China in 1957 and left in 1960. When I went in 1957, Sino-Indian relations were at their height. Being an Indian in China I was a most honoured guest. When we left in 1960, once again the graph was beginning to climb a little, because Zhou Enlai had to come to Delhi for the last prime ministerial meeting on the border talks. And from where we were persona non grata for several months before that, suddenly we were invited, feted ...

IFAJ: Were things then relaxed?

MSB: No, I would not use that word. Rather, things were in a “persuasive mode”, if I can use that phrase. There was clearly a desire to express and convey the message that China was keen to come to some settlement on the border question and avoid confrontation. However, to begin with, I belonged to an unusual Indian Foreign Service batch. All four of us (the new recruits) chose languages which nobody else wanted. One had Persian, one wanted Japanese, one asked for Chinese and the fourth was for Russian.

In a way, we made history at the ministry level. Nobody could understand why we opted for these difficult languages. So it happened – all the four got the postings they wanted, because no one else was willing to go to these unattractive places. That is how it began. So, the long journey to China began – from Bombay to Delhi, Delhi to Calcutta, and Calcutta to Hong Kong. It was a very slow flight. In those days the Embassy in Beijing used to send a courier every week to Hong Kong because all the stores for the diplomats came in the diplomatic bag.

My arrival was timed with the visit of the courier so that he could escort me back. I had two bags. We went to the extreme edge of British Hong Kong. There was a bridge called No Man's Bridge. You crossed it all alone to Chun Chun, as it was pronounced in those days – now it is called Shun Zun. There is no bridge and barrier now between Hong Kong and Chun Chun. It had a railway station but the station did not connect with the railway station across the border. This bridge was the divide. On the British side, there were soldiers ready with guns. Hong Kong always felt that the enormous China was sitting on its head. And it could not be a simple thing like turning off water and Hong Kong would have been finished. That is interesting – China didn't do that. The other side, the Chinese side, was very basic, very simple but full of human beings. What they did not have in material terms they made up for in terms of human beings. Being Indians, we were very honoured guests. So we were feted to a meal and put on the train to Canton.

IFAJ: Would you kindly tell us if you had any briefing session with Nehru or anyone else before going to China?

MSB: Yes, we all had to be interviewed by Nehru before we went abroad. I remember walking into Nehru's office earlier during my student years. I had been to see him once to invite him to our convocation. And I walked around saying, "These are hands which touched the shoes of Nehru, so if anyone wants to feed me please feed me .. ." I was full of admiration for him. We were looking forward to meeting him. I walked in – and he stared – and suddenly my spirit sank because he looked a little disapproving – and I thought, am I wearing wrong clothes or is something wrong with me? He asked, "You want to go to China?" I said, Yes. He said, "What do you know about China?" He said it in a tone that indicated that you simply could not know anything about China. I said,

“Not very much, I have read only a few books.” He asked, “Which?” I mentioned some. And he said, “Oh that one about China (On the Days of Revolution)? That is quite good”. Then silence. I did not know where to go from there. Then he said, “No, I don’t like this”. I was again startled. “I don’t think women like you should be in Foreign Service. You are depriving a man of his job. You probably would get married and leave the service. All our investment would be lost.” I must say that startled me because in those days you expected him to be full of modern views and in favour of bringing women out into the open. I said, “I cannot give you any guarantee about the future, Mr Prime Minister. It is my right to apply for a job as it is for a young man. And if I have some qualities and if I fulfil the qualifications I see no reason why you have this ruling that if a woman marries she has to resign.” I said that was a “stupid ruling”. He was a little startled. He said, “Will your mother come after me?” Mind you, “mother”, not even father – again provoked me as a daughter. I said, “Why my mother?” He said, “Stick leke toh nahin ayegi teri Maa [Will your mother come with a stick] to say, Why are you sending her to China? Why can’t you send her to a civilised place like London?” I said, “I took my own decision” and left it at that.

So there was really no interview. I did try to see if he would like to give me an insight or tell me something about what our policy toward China should be. I was asking because I had a brief spell with his private secretary, the Secretary General in the Prime Minister’s Office. I remembered just before I left that we had traders coming from Ladakh to ask, What is India doing? A road is being built through Ladakh, through Aksai Chin. I remember asking the Secretary General about it. He said, “It is a top secret document. This must go to Mr Nehru.” So the traders were taken and whatever was written on the paper was sent to Mr Nehru. His response was, “This is a matter for the Home Ministry”. And that was the end of the matter. I must say that surprised me a great deal. Although I did not have any clue about the nascent border problem, the mere fact that another country was building a road in our territory and he didn’t want to take cognisance of it struck me as odd.

So Nehru gave me no idea at all about what he expected in the relationship with China. Mind you, I was of that generation which was in a sense brought up politically on Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai and here there was nothing. I thought, this is really strange. I was going into blankness. I had no idea what it was all about. But as it happened, for the rest of my life as it were, it left a strong question mark in mind about Mr Nehru’s values and his policies because I had not

expected him to behave as a traditionalist.

IFAJ: Did he approve your appointment to China?

MSB: Yes, he approved, he could not say, No. No one wanted go to China in any case, so he would not have said, No. It was, I think, Nehru's ambivalence. On the one hand he would say women must be educated, on the other hand he said that women who have education should bring up more educated children to serve the nation. I remember, in the Women's College when he came we all said, "We are all Gandhians and idealists. We want to work in the villages." He was angry. He said, "We are giving you modern education. You build modern temples ..., we will take care of the countryside."

Coming to my Beijing visit: We took the train. I had two suitcases. The courier had all the bags, provisions and so on for the Embassy and the diplomats. In changing trains at Canton one of my suitcases was left behind. I noticed this after the train started. We went and told the guard on the train, Look this has happened. He was very agitated and said, "Has this happened to an Indian, an honoured guest? Don't worry, I will take full responsibility and care." He came at midnight, woke me up and said, "Your suitcase has been found. It is being dispatched and it will reach Beijing may be the day after, so please don't be worried." The train was very basic; they had nothing but clean sheets, fresh hot water, fresh tea, etc. If you remember, in those days the Chinese used to say, "We are underpopulated. We don't have sufficient people."

IFAJ: Was there no flight those days from Hong Kong to Beijing?

MSB: No. So everything was basic. As I said earlier, the warmth made up for everything else. Clean compartments. Everything was spotlessly clean. You could not drop a piece of paper anywhere you went, soft class or hard class, it was all the same. At every station everyone would get out and the cleaners would clean the train from the outside. On my welcome, they played music from Awara of Raj Kapoor. Main Awara Hun was absolutely popular, there was nobody in China who did not sing Main Awara Hun. Then very sweetly the cook, who was an Indian in the dinner hall, was asked by the courier to come to the kitchen and prepare an Indian meal for me. It came as a disappointment as I was looking forward to Chinese food. So I thanked them and said, Let the next meal be Chinese. This was the atmosphere and ambience. In Beijing I stayed with the Ambassador because there was no accommodation for me for a couple of days.

IFAJ: Who was the Indian Ambassador at that time?

MSB: R.K. Nehru. Maybe a week after I reached, the Chinese were playing Shakuntala, so we all were invited. They translated it into Chinese. In the first interval we were invited by Zhou Enlai to have a drink. I was very shy as a young girl, not knowing what to do.

IFAJ: How many people were in the Indian Embassy at the time?

MSB: We had one military attaché, two First Secretaries. Mr Natwar Singh was First Secretary, Mr Bhutani was the Second and I was Third Secretary – so four or five on the diplomatic side.

We were all invited to have a drink. I was standing in a corner talking to somebody. Suddenly, Zhou Enlai came right across the room and in a loud voice said, “I wish to welcome the first woman diplomat in China.” I was startled. Again he said, “I want to welcome her because this is our triumph, this is Asia’s triumph”. You see the difference between Nehru’s reaction and his. Yes, that may have been just very clever diplomacy, but then he went on to recall the names of all the Indian women in the Foreign Service. He knew Muthamma by name. He knew Rukmani Menon, he knew Laxmi Menon. Mind you, these names were hard for them to remember, but he knew where they were posted. He said, “We don’t have a single woman. This is a lesson for us. We must catch up with you. I promise, India, you are a model for China and we will follow you.”

Zhou Enlai asked me where I was staying. I said, “I am happy with the Ambassador and I just have moved into Jin Chang Hotel”. He said, “You haven’t got accommodation?” I said, “Not yet.” He called somebody and said to him to see that they found a house for me. And within a week they found accommodation for me. Then he said, “I heard you are planning to go to the university to learn Chinese”. I said, “Yes.” He said, “We will make that possible.”

IFAJ: Didn’t they have any woman officer in the Foreign Service either?

MSB: No, they didn’t. So, I was amazed because he remembered these names and the places where they were posted. Then when he was talking to me, he called a waiter and said, “I want the evening newspaper.” The waiter came from the back and tapped the newspaper on his shoulder and said in Chinese, “Your paper, Comrade.” No courtesy, no bowing, no scraping, none of that kind. I was

quite amazed to see a totally different political and social culture. That was during the first interval of Shakuntala.

During the second interval, I was standing near a table with a soft drink in hand. A rather mousy looking brown-haired woman came and introduced herself as Dungin Zhou and asked, "Have you got your drinks or would you like some?" Then in her halting English and with my very halting Chinese, we had a conversation for a little while.

IFAJ: You picked up Chinese before you reached China?

MSB: I had a stint at Oxford. But all that Chinese had to be unlearned, especially the language, because in China the language was very basic. You knew a thousand characters, everybody knew the same language, you didn't have to learn various dialects. Today it is very different. Today the language is so rich because they are borrowing from history, from culture, from philosophy and anecdotal. It is a very subtle language. If you don't know history and poetry and so on, you can miss all the nuances of what they are saying. This is what used to happen then. For instance, they put up a play on the sacking of a certain minister of the sixteenth century. That was allegorical because of the problems Mao was having with the Defence Minister. If you didn't know this, you could not get the real meaning. The older Chinese understood this but the younger Chinese with no knowledge of history and arts did not.

Anyway, let us get back to this mousy woman. She was very nice, very gentle, also quiet. We talked a little and she said she was interested in arts and what women were doing, etc. As soon as the play ended, I was literally kidnapped by the Ambassador and his wife and rushed to the car. I was again very surprised. There were a lot of surprises that day. I was asked, "What did Mrs Zhou Enlai say to you?" There was no way of knowing that Dungin Zhou was the wife of Zhou Enlai. There were so many Dungs, Yangs and Ings and I was completely new, so there was nothing in the behaviour of the people around us to indicate that the person was important or significant.

IFAJ: None of your colleagues briefed you?

MSB: No, we were only a few at that time, so

IFAJ: Perhaps Zhou Enlai briefed her to go and talk to you?

MSB: Yes, maybe, because I was standing alone – who knows! But the point is that there was certain awareness on their side and they were certainly reaching

out to the Indians. As far as their political culture was concerned, there was, at least superficially, at least to someone who was new and unused to that society, a very high degree of equality, lack of secrecy, so on and so forth. Everyone was wearing the same kind of clothes. That also is very important. So this was the introduction. This was the social and political culture of China. Let me add one thing. It was a very basic society, and there was absolutely nothing except a lot of traditional skills.

IFAJ: Not many cars?

MSB: No cars. Only official cars, three or four of the diplomatic community.

IFAJ: Buses?

MSB: A few buses. Rickshaws were still there and also pedicabs, but no taxis. My first journey was rather rough, dirty, and by pedicabs. There was no fan in the hotel rooms. We had to get permission to bring in a small table fan. It was quite warm. And by 10.30 or 11 a.m. electricity was off because they were conserving. Today, it is a blaze of lights.

IFAJ: Were there any cinema halls in Beijing?

MSB: There must have been, but I never went to cinema. I went to operas. Lot of operas, theatres, music, acrobatics. We showed Indian films at the Embassy and all the shows ran to packed houses. Today, I am told quietly (I just came back from China) to send a classical dancer. You know, audiences can't take one person dancing for two and a half hours. During the cultural exchange last time, we had to give free tickets so that the hall would be full and even then people wouldn't wait. You see how the world has changed. The same is true about a lot of Indian films.

IFAJ: They themselves have a burgeoning film industry.

MSB: No, everything is open. They get American films before we do. So, if we have a cultural exchange we have to have it in contemporary terms, not as a throwback. So, I was saying that everything was very traditional in China in those days.

IFAJ: Traditional and at the basic level

MSB: Yes, at the basic level. There were a few people who would stitch up your garment if you wanted to, all these little private things – selling flowers, birds, but not foodstuff. For foreigners there was a separate area where they bought

fruits and vegetables or meat because nothing else was available. For domestic help, you had to apply to the ministry and they provide you with a cook and a waiter, and so on.

IFAJ: You could not take anyone from India?

MSB: No, you could not. But they saw to it that those whom they sent you knew Indian cooking and some Hindi. It is interesting that they learnt more Hindustani than we diplomats.

I would like to mention just two events on how relations or foreign policy was shaping. As I said, we were honoured guests. There was a banquet and we were seated at the high table. If Zhou Enlai wanted to go to the dance floor he would always ask an Indian to dance the first dance, which was quite the order of the day.

Then we began to sense a little uneasiness. Those were interesting years. They had the Anti-Rightist Campaign. In November 1956 there was the 20th Party Congress. A great deal was going on in China. A debate was going on and we were not always aware of it. But we could sense it in the atmosphere. There was the Anti-Rightist campaign that led to the Hundred Flowers Bloom that led to the Great Leap Forward. All these developments were going on at the same time. As far as the debate and the border issue were concerned, whatever was happening and whatever were their concerns, they were not yet in the public domain. One thing you must realise is how difficult it was to communicate. Sometimes it took two days to get a phone call and then it was routed through Australia. It was not always clear. We had a small and primitive system. So we didn't get too much information from the Ministry or from here as to what was happening. Then came the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1958.

Now I want to talk about just two events that deeply affected India-China relations and superpower relations with India and China. The first was the 1958 crisis. We knew there was great tension, fear of war, et cetera and something might happen in the Taiwan Straits. These are only my recollections. I was so junior at that time that there was no question of knowing and seeing the documents. I did not see any document. I only heard what was happening. For instance, I came to know that Mr Krishna Menon, who was then in New York, sent a message to Zhou Enlai offering his personal mediation in the Taiwan Straits crisis. I think the first time Zhou Enlai thanked him but did not respond in

one way or another.

The second time, I remember, Krishna Menon approached Ambassador, G. Parthasarathy. He asked him to convey that message to Zhou, in case the message had not been understood by the Chinese. I recollect a curt “Thank you. We do not need your mediation. We can manage our own affairs.” It did suggest that unlike the earlier days, the Chinese were now not so warm towards us and, secondly, what they considered to be their domestic matter they would handle themselves.

IFAJ: Do you think Krishna Menon had any hint or approval from the Government of India regarding his offer?

MSB: I don't know what actually took place between the Ambassador and Zhou Enlai. It does appear that this message was not routed through Delhi. It was an initiative that Krishna Menon took and perhaps Zhou Enlai knew it. That is speculation. But certainly we knew about this initiative. That message must have been received by us because by 1958 there was trouble on the border issue, of which we knew nothing. We did not know, at least, the details of what was going on. But that message, I think, came across and that was the first indication.

Then came the summer of 1959, after the turmoil in Tibet. I was saying it is important to remember how difficult communication was in those days. Sometimes it took two days to connect to Delhi on the telephone, sometimes we got it on wireless or whatever. We had a Morse system also. We didn't know much about what was happening in Tibet. I remember that it hit the headlines in the Chinese papers when the Chinese cracked down, when the Dalai Lama fled, or when they reinstated control over Tibet. Those were uneasy days.

IFAJ: Didn't we have intelligence at that time?

MSB: We did have. In fact, we always had our military attaché.

IFAJ: Were they not able to feed adequate information about what was happening there? Or they only fed to the Ambassador ... ?

MSB: I don't know the connection among intelligence, the Ministry, and Panditji. We knew that General B.N. Mullick from the armed forces dealt directly with Nehru. We didn't know to what extent the Ministry was involved and I still don't know. There was military intelligence as well as intelligence. I

don't know really, because he told me later, when he came back to India, that he had received an invitation for the opening of the Aksai Chin Road.

IFAJ: So the Chinese even thought of inviting him!

MSB: They had informed us about opening it and also invited us. Again, I think the invitation here was – I would follow as to what happened to it. I think it is wrong to say that we knew nothing about it. I told about the traders and now the infiltrators. Anyway, by the summer of 1959 things on the border were heating up.

One evening I was on duty at the Embassy with Mr Parthasarathy. He was restless and was walking up and down waiting for Ajay Ghosh of the CPI (Communist Party of India). Ajay Ghosh was coming from Moscow. Earlier, Khrushchev visited Beijing and some talks took place between the Chinese and the Russians. So, somewhere the clouds were gathering. I gathered this from the Ambassador's anxiety and the context that Ajay Ghosh had gone to find out what the Russians might do in the exchange of notes between India and China.

IFAJ: Did the Chinese harden their position?

MSB: No, what the Chinese might do and what position the Russians would take. Now you would remember that the last note that Nehru sent in March or at the time of the Tibet revolt. Earlier, notes had been coming and going quite frequently, but on this note there was no response from the Chinese. We waited for six months. And they were testing the waters domestically. My analysis is that they were testing waters both at home and with the Russians. So we waited. Ajay Ghosh came and we made some polite conversation. And I had to leave because it was a top-level secret discussion. But the atmosphere changed.

IFAJ: Did the atmosphere change after Ajay Ghosh's visit?

MSB: No. Within the Embassy, there was some change in mood. There was confidence in the Embassy and a certain amount of cheer, so we were talking among ourselves. We concluded that perhaps the Russians had given us some assurances. Then came the press note, the Press Statement issued at midnight in Beijing, which distinguished between friends and brothers. They couldn't imagine that a country like India would attack China, which was the beginning of the overt dispute between China and the Soviet Union.

IFAJ: Their tensions started in 1956

MSB: Oh, yes. But tensions had started much earlier. By 1956 they became visible and began to increase. Again, you have to link it with the domestic politics in China and the divide between the leadership – those who thought that the Soviet role was the correct role and those who thought Mao’s role was correct. And this divide built up to June 1960, when the Soviets tore up the agreement to give China the model of the atom bomb and help them build the bomb. So, as far as we are concerned, going back to the summer or autumn of 1959, certainly all these strands got intermingled – India-China, China-Soviet Union and Soviet Union-India – forming a triangle. When Pakistan later came into the picture, it became a quadrangle. What is interesting is what one gathers in China – that the note was issued on the night previous to Zhou Enlai’s reply to Nehru, which was then a statement and a claim on the border, the final claim in response to the March note. Apparently, that note had been shown by China to the Soviet Union, not at government level but at party level. In the Great Debate you would find – and in all the letters that were exchanged at the party level – the hope saying, Look, we are not going to ask for anything. But if you don’t support us, this is the note we will send. And the Chinese would tell, don’t send that note or we would be forced to make the statement. Hen and egg wali baat hai [It’s a matter of whether the chicken came first or the egg]. So, when the Soviets issued the statement, the Chinese publicised that note even before it reached Nehru.

IFAJ: Who did it first, the Chinese or the Soviets?

MSB: The Soviets. The Soviet statement came first. Immediately, the Chinese publicised the statement. I am saying they publicised the letter before it reached Nehru.

IFAJ: They dispatched the letter first and then the Soviets reacted

MSB: No. You see, the press statement was issued not from Moscow, it was issued from Beijing. That is another interesting part of it. Not Moscow – that would have been a different angle to it. It was issued at midnight from Beijing. And the Chinese sent the letter and published it immediately before we got it. You can see the interlinkages, which I have put down in one of my articles, saying that by the summer of 1959–60 our relations with China on the border issues were so intertwined with the Sino-Soviet relations that you could not

separate the two. To look on the border issue in a purely bilateral territorial context is to trivialise the issue and to miss the larger picture.

IFAJ: You are right. There are a few articles and studies which have said that one of the reasons why the Chinese did to India whatever they did was actually a reaction to the US and the Soviet Union. They thought they were building India as a counterweight and they would not let that happen.

MSB: I wrote an article, just before the Maxwell's book was published, in the IDSA Journal. And I think the argument made there still stands. It says this is what and why the Chinese attacked. It is not territory they wanted. It was an international political message. It amazes me when I look back. Even scholars in India who write about Sino-Indian relations, on the territorial dispute, are so quiet about certain issues that were very important to Nehru's decisions. "Throw them out", he says. What were these issues? They knew there was a deep gulf within the leadership and how isolated Mao was. The leadership that was not isolated was the pro-Moscow faction. We should have known how bad was the economic situation. Those were three bad years. I have seen buses with gobar [cow dung manure] bags on their heads. The Soviets withdrew the oil, food and health support that they were providing. There was trouble. I mean, entry routes into Tibet from China were nightmarish. If you don't have air links, food, fuel, and if you don't have trains, you can be ambushed at any point. And now with the CIA documents, you know what help was being given to the Tibetans by the Taiwanese and the Americans. So, when we knew that they didn't have fuel and the economy was in a poor shape, we knew that the leadership was divided and we must have had – this is my speculation – fair intelligence by the Americans as to what were Chinese military activities in Tibet. Clearly, from what we have seen, from the Chinese point of view they had very little preparation and at each stage they pursued the policy of avoiding confrontation.

Recent revelations surprise me. Nobody in India writes about it now-a-days. So we are culpable to the extent that the Americans are. Here we take it for granted – that is how the government behaved. When one Chinese hacks into your something, it becomes a big thing. There is a certain lack of balance in how we deal with the issue.

IFAJ: Do you remember Karunakaran's book, *The History of the 1962 War*, in which he said that we messed up the "forward policy"? He was lashed in Parliament – everybody abused him.

MSB: Yes. After that article I wrote, I also was followed by intelligence for months and they came to see my landlord several times. I was then very poor, living in a barsati, having left my husband with a little child. It became very difficult because they would ask my neighbours, my landlord, etc. My landlord came to me and said, "Look, if this is going to happen, I will ask you to leave". I said, "Next time if the intelligence people come, send them up to me." Next time one man came. I offered him tea and asked, "Where have you come from?" He replied that he was from the Foreigners Registration Office. I said, "What do you want to know?" He said, "I am sorry, I know you belong to a good family, I just need to ask you two questions." I asked, "What are they?" He asked, "You work for the Department of Chinese Studies. Does the Chinese Embassy pay money or fund the Department?" This was very funny, as it indicated a very low level of intelligence.

IFAJ: Thanks, for sharing with us your interesting and insightful experiences with the Chinese.
