



Roots of Sino-Indian Antipathy

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The Fractured Himalayas: India, Tibet, China 1949-1962

By Nirupama Rao

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India's relations with China remain an absorbing theme for policy makers and international affairs analysts; more so at present when their armed forces stand eyeball to eyeball in the Ladakh region of the Himalayas, sharpening their competition and contest for strategic space in India's immediate neighbourhood and the larger Indo-Pacific region. Nirupama Rao's *The Fractured Himalayas* takes us to the roots of conflict and rivalry between the Asian giants. The author has impeccable credentials to write on India-China relations, as she has not only been India's Ambassador in China but also its Foreign Secretary. What she offers in her book is a carefully knit narrative based on meticulous scrutiny of the facts derived from copious research, buttressed by valuable and nuanced insights. Her narrative presents a robust Indian perspective on how China's determination to occupy and control Tibet and dominate the Himalayas shattered India's vision of building a civilisationally defined relationship of co-existence with China for the peace and prosperity of Asia.

The book – in 16 chapters, an introduction and a conclusion ('coda') – covers 13 years, starting with the victory of Communist Revolution in China in 1949 and ending with China's war on India in 1962. During this period, China's military annexation of Tibet forced India to withdraw its traditional presence from both Tibet and Xinjiang. India and China's brief period of peaceful coexistence between 1954 and 1956, the turbulence in Tibet in 1959 that led the Dalai Lama seeking refuge in India and encroachments on the disputed border that precipitated China's unexpected, one month-long aggression on India, have been carefully analysed. In the last two chapters, significant points of the Himalayan conflict and their relevance to the present-day have also been flagged. Indeed, the issues arising from Tibetan resistance to Chinese control and the complexity of India and China's claims on the border are so entangled that they continue to vitiate their mutual engagement in diverse fields.

Rao brings out the deep divide in India and China's perceptions of each other. Their approaches to the status of Tibet and their Himalayan border were also quite divergent and conflicting. India looked at China as the Asian resurgent power, capable of playing a major role in Asian and world affairs. For China, independent India was weak, unorganised and persisting with the old habits of being a "running dog" of the British empire. "The Chinese had a profound contempt for India and also a sense of very considerable superiority towards them", writes Rao, quoting a British assessment (p. 22). On Tibet, the Chinese had an imperial claim ignoring its unquestioned status as an independent country between 1911 and 1950. The book provides useful details of the Chinese military takeover of Tibet in 1951. Jawaharlal Nehru was guided by the advice of aids like K M Panikkar that "India's interests in Tibet beyond trade policy and recognized boundary were shadowy" (p. 66). India's support for Tibet was thus based more on humanitarian considerations to ensure that Tibet's unique

cultural identity would not be destroyed rather than its potential as a strategic buffer against China (pp. 56-57). India's position on Tibet was also constrained by the ambiguity it inherited from the British on terms like suzerainty, internal autonomy and sovereignty. The British gave up their position on Tibet's suzerainty in 2008 (p. 59). While accepting China's takeover of Tibet, India viewed the border with Tibet separately and held to the historical validity of the McMahon Line. The Chinese never accepted this line and approached the border from their own imperial perspective, denouncing British treaties and agreements with Tibet.

Nehru has been criticised for his Tibet and China policies. Rao lists their flaws which catalysed India's retreat from Tibet and military defeat to the Chinese in 1962. Nehru did not take a strategic view of Tibet or Ladakh, holding to the McMahon line as the border while not seeking either Chinese endorsements or fortifying against encroachments. He viewed the Chinese as "arrogant, devious, hypocritical and thoroughly unreliable" (p. 279), but was keen to engage them and take them at face value. However, Rao frames these policies in the context of Nehru's constraints, and rejects the politicised, ill-informed attacks made against him in hindsight. Unlike in China, India was deeply divided internally on its Tibet/China policy. There were conflicting opinions among top leaders, such as Nehru and Sardar Patel, and senior bureaucrats (pp. 75-78). India was economically and militarily not strong enough to deter the Chinese from taking over Tibet, and it was naïve to assume that the Chinese would not militarily advance against India, given differences on the border.

According to the author, it is not fair to blame Nehru's forward policy in provoking the Chinese: China was preparing for military confrontation with India from the beginning (pp. 414-418). At one stage, Nehru offered watershed and traditional habitation as principles for settling the border without referencing the McMahon Line, as it was anathema to the Chinese (p. 268) but did not elicit a response. Rao, however, finds a "fatal flaw in Indian policy responses (like forward policy), especially in the top echelons of leadership" for believing "China would abstain from a full and frontal attack on Indian positions" (p. 394). While Nehru sought peace and coexistence with China to play a larger role in world affairs (like peace building in Korea and Indochina), the Chinese approached India with a bilaterally focused strategic view of consolidating themselves in the Himalayas. They deceived India by not questioning its McMahon line and India's border claims until establishing firmer control on Tibet (pp. 122-123, 143). Mao Tse Tung was also not comfortable with India's growing acceptance in the international community, including from the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. China's acceptance of peaceful coexistence was tactical, to consolidate themselves in Tibet and to use India to facilitate its rehabilitation in the international community, including its membership in the United Nations. The failure of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' and unstable internal conditions also forced him to wage a diversionary war with India (pp. 416, 434).

This rigorously researched and well-written book is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the roots of the Sino-Indian strategic mismatch in Asia and offers valuable insights to those who deal with this aspect of the emerging Indo-Pacific region. One wishes the author had more time and space to scrutinise the role played by the US and the United Kingdom in India and China's evolving conflict and how internal dynamics influenced the shaping of Mao and his colleagues' India policy. Rao's conclusions also leave us worried.

With systematic divergences and leadership aspirations between India and China, the resolution of their border dispute looks extremely difficult in the foreseeable future. “Xi Jinping’s global ambitions exceed those of Mao and Zhou Enlai” and “China today is the flag bearer of a new imperium in Asia” (p. 464). That is perhaps why Manmohan Singh’s suave approach and Narendra Modi’s informal ‘Summit Diplomacy’ have not delivered the expected results in resolving India’s China riddle. “Only a political solution can work which may necessitate both India and China to refashion their claims” on borders, says the author (p. 468). Such a solution looks too distant in view of Xi’s new moves to firm up China’s control in Tibet and fortify People’s Liberation Army deployments in Ladakh, given a new law promulgated by the Chinese for the border.

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