

India-China Relations 1947-2000: A Documentary Study
(five volumes)

Introduced and edited, Avtar Singh Bhasin
Geetika Publishers, New Delhi, 2018
(Pages 5318 + cccxviii, Rs.15,000)

This voluminous collection includes 2523 documents, compiled over a 5-year span by AS Bhasin, formerly of Ministry of External Affairs's Historical Division, who has to his credit a 10-volume compilation of India-Pakistan documents, and similar multi-volume archival material covering India's relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, as well as ASEAN, and annual compilations of official Indian documents covering 2002 to 2013.

Unlike with all the other compilations Bhasin, this time he did not get access to the official Ministry of External Affairs papers, perhaps on the reasoning that because of the unresolved India-China border issue, publication would be inimical to Indian interests. Bhasin relied instead on the documents available at the Nehru Memorial Library, i.e. material in the personal collections of Jawaharlal Nehru and many other Indian foreign policy actors, which is now open for access by scholars.

In net terms a wealth of new material is offered, which will be chewed over by researchers in the coming months and years; it will hopefully enrich, even inspire, new scholarship and PhD dissertations. As to the wider issue of public disclosure of sensitive material, several elements need examination. First, we seldom get access to the reasoning behind the policy actions narrated in what is published here. That data remains locked inside the closed dossiers. But some of the reasoning and elements behind the actions taken now becomes clearer, and this is a major net addition that helps our understanding. Second, Chinese counterpart documents have not been published. That is true, but diverse Chinese sources provide patchy access to information that gives an outline of the very complex jigsaw images. Some Chinese language material is now available via the personal memoirs of Chinese actors; some Politburo documents have been published in Hong Kong; and other sources, such as the Woodrow Wilson Center Digital Archive also gives access to relevant documents. Example: A priceless gem is the verbatim text of the Mao-Khrushchev encounter in Beijing of 2 October 1959, provided by Soviet sources, to the Wilson collection; India-China relations figure prominently. Third, might it be that the Indian documents, if seen in isolation might give an unbalanced picture of the true story, by highlighting Indian failures, in the absence of insight into Chinese motivations or machinations? Yes, that is a danger; it will be the responsibility of scholars to provide balanced perspectives.

Against this is the immense benefit that comes from transparency, communicating especially to Indian publics the manner in which Indian actions evolved on China and on the Tibet issue. It thus becomes essential to build out of such a collection holistic, rigorous and balanced understanding of those events. We have to depend

on scholars to individually and collectively work on this new material, to produce deeper insights.

The 1954 agreement was the very first major bilateral diplomatic encounter between the two independent states, producing an agreement ‘On Trade and Intercourse between the Tibetan Region of China and India’. It was signed on 29 April 1954, after four months of hard negotiations held exclusively in Beijing. When the talks began on 30 December 1953, both sides had spoken of producing an agreement in two weeks, to show to the world how these two Asian powers would handle their relationship. This preceded any direct conversation between Indian and Chinese leaders; it bears examination through the optic of the Bhasin papers, as a sample of the insights provided.

We find a Ministry of External Affairs note of 1 December 1953, setting out the negotiation ‘strategy’. Rigorous examination of India’s negotiation objectives is absent. Nor is there any assessment of Chinese objectives. The note is almost obsessive in urging that discussion on the border should be avoided. ‘As the Prime Minister has said the frontier question is the most important question...so far as our Northern border is concerned it is well defined by usage, custom and history. It would, therefore, not be in our interest to open this question or give any indication that we are in doubt about our frontier.’ (p. 970). And yet the note goes on: ‘There are a few other disputed areas like the Aksai plain in Ladakh, Hunza, Dakhpo-Garpo, Gritti, Nilang, Jodang, Towang, and Wolang which are shown as ours in our maps and by the Chinese as theirs in their maps...we should not be prepared to give up any of these places except in return for an overall acceptance of our frontier by the Chinese.’ (p.970).

Three questions arise: first, should we not have anticipated that a liberated China would not countenance a continuation of the extra-territorial rights that colonial Britain enjoyed in Tibet – such as stationing of a garrison of some 150 armed soldiers, trade agencies, and maintenance of rest-houses, besides ‘treasuries’ and other properties? Second, we did not assess what China’s occupation of Tibet, which we readily accepted as unalterable, would produce over the next five or ten years, in terms of Tibet-China economic links, and how those links would largely spell the doom of India-Tibet border trade. And finally, above all, how could a unilateral assertion of our border pass muster, when we were aware of significant disputed areas as evident in Chinese maps and a rising tempo of border confrontations?

In the event, the ink on the 1954 agreement was hardly dry before we faced the first incident of a Chinese incursion across what we understood as the border in July 1954, at Bara Hoti across the Niti Pass in the Middle Sector of the border. In preparing for the 1954 negotiations, no one in India had asked what China’s occupation of Tibet might mean in terms Chinese troops coming to the border and how this might affect management of the border. We also did not consider the consequences on Indian political links in Tibet.

Above all, no one anticipated the impact on Indian publics of our dichotomous position – full awareness of the border dispute, but repeated assertions that there was nothing to negotiate with China. It locked us into an increasingly rigid stance, and public rigidity on our claim, imprisoned us into rejection of the very notion of a compromise. The chronicles of the Nehru-Zhou talks of 1960, the secret message that Zhou conveyed in January 1963 through Chargé d'affaires PK Banerjee (*My Peking Memoirs of The Chinese Invasion of India*, 1990, pp.87-101), and the border swap deal that China reiterated in the Vajpayee-Deng talks of 1978, Eric Gonsalves talks of 1982 (see his Oral History), and the Rajiv Gandhi-Deng talks of 1988, simply became way-posts in this Greek tragedy.

How shall we un-ride the tiger of our own distorted public narrative? Perhaps archival material, as in this book, might help to reframe our public understanding. That is much needed, even if it is a slender hope.

Kishan S Rana, Former diplomat, teacher, author; emeritus fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies Delhi, emeritus professor, DiploFoundation, Malta and Geneva.
kishanrana@gmail.com
