

‘China’s Changing Tibet Policy: How India Needs to Prepare’

Speaker: Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic and Strategic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*
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The presentation by Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic and Strategic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*, was made in the context of her visit to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in August 2014 as a part of a delegation of South Asian Journalists on a guided tour of Lhasa city and nearby provinces. This was her second visit to the region, the first being in 2007. Both the visits were courtesy invitation by the Chinese government. This time, the delegation was flown into Lhasa after another short guided tour in Beijing. Whereas, in 2007, she had journeyed on the much famed Qinghai-Tibet rail line that had been completed and opened for public use in 2006. Haidar described the 8 days journey as ‘eye opening’. Interestingly, the visit in 2014 coincided with another major event in Lhasa organised by the State Council Information Office – the ‘Fourth Forum on Development of Tibet’. The forum was held on 12 and 13 August 2014 and while she was not a participant, she informed that N. Ram, the Chairman of

Kasturi Group and Sons participated in the event. The speaker mentioned that the delegation was housed in a hotel in a place called Zedan in Shannan prefecture.

At the outset, Haidar felt it important to announce some disclaimers pertaining to her presentation for she felt that, all being said, she was there on a short visit which was a guided tour and hence, she could not claim to have seen everything. Even so, she hoped to share honestly what she had seen. Having been on such guided tours quite a number of times, she felt confident about her ability to see things that were valuable. She also explained that she would not touch upon political issues.

Since she felt that she was not an expert on the subject, as a journalist, she had had the privilege to get a glimpse of the life in TAR. Therefore, she had organised her presentation to mainly compare the visible changes from her two visits in 2007 and 2014. Overall, her presentation touched upon a number of issues such as Chinese attitudes towards the Dalai Lama, security situation, escape of Tibetan refugees into India, Lhasa's urban and segregated cityscape, China's policies and achievements in Tibet, environmental concerns, self-immolations, Chinese confidence in Tibet, etc. and lessons for India from some of the developments.

Comparison of 2007 and 2014 visits

On the question of freedom to travel and interact with local people, Haidar and company were able to travel freely especially during (late) night times. But the fact also was that they had a very packed itinerary, so were hardly free, except for evenings. They used interpreters and also guides (locals + from Beijing).

Compared to 2007 when the officials seemed to be looking to a post-Dalai Lama period, this time, she felt that Beijing seems to be open to a solution during the lifetime of the current Dalai Lama. She based her analysis on the statement by Wu Yingjie, the Deputy Party Secretary of the TAR who did not make any derisive statements against the Dalai Lama. Instead he said that talks were ongoing and that they were willing to discuss the future of the Dalai Lama. In her words, Yingjie 'surprised' them and that it was a 'bolt from the blue for all of us'. This, she assessed as positive as the talks had stalled since 2010. She also referred to three other developments in 2013 – a statement by Jin Wei of the Central party School, lifting of ban on Dalai Lama's pictures and a high level party conference in Qinghai which issued directions about references to Dalai Lama – as indication of Beijing's moderating stance on Tibet. She came back to this point several times in the course of the presentation and during the discussion session to emphasise the point that Beijing now seemed confident with regards Tibet and hence, this presents as an opportunity for India.

Unlike 2007, this time they were able to visit the part of the Norbulingka, summer palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa which was built from 1951-54. For her, it was interesting to see the Dalai Lama's throne which the Tibetan people were openly worshipping as a shrine. There were also prayer flags and the radio gifted by Nehru to the 14th Dalai Lama and so on displayed for public viewing. She was also surprised to spot a familiar face, the photo of Sakya Rinpoche from Dehradun in another monastery. According to her, he had been visiting his monastery in Tibet several times.

On the question of police/army presence on streets of Lhasa, she saw a marked change from 2007. Then, there was one security personnel per person and little riot kiosks every 1 km manned by about 3-4 personnel. She also saw some tongs hung on the kiosk walls, which she

thinks may have been meant for self-immolators (sic). This time, she saw that the security was all gone and it looked like the Chinese are considering it more like a law and order situation. She only saw one kiosk in Lhasa which was also all wrapped up. However, this time there was a lot of check points which was not there in 2007.

Haidar also cited official figures pertaining to amount of money spent by the Chinese government in infrastructural development of the region – 121 bn for 6 airports, 1300 km of rail road connectivity, etc. She saw the rail connectivity to Shigatse as important. At one of the stations which she was able to visit, she found that it was grander than even most airports. While it was being used by about 100 people or so, it had the capacity to process much more. This, she attributed to China's vision and grand planning. While acknowledging there are environment related concerns, drawing from the grandeur of infrastructural development, she pointed out that it is evident 'where the money is being spent'.

She was also impressed by the grand display and organisation of the Shoton festival. According to her, there were about 100,000 visitors out of which about 10 percent were foreigners. She mentioned that one can see a similar type of crowd control in India too, at the Kumbh mela.

She also positively commented on the modernisation and urbanisation of Lhasa. According to her, the old part of Lhasa now 'looked much better' and more 'standardised' and that she couldn't recognise it from her last visit.

Unlike 2007, she was able to easily access facebook and twitter. As an aside, she narrated how she received a barrage of criticisms from people following her blog and commenting why she does not report honestly about what the Chinese are doing in Tibet. In fact, she also mentioned about receiving a photoshopped image of soldiers standing on the very mountain from where the thangka was being unveiled during the Shoton festival. This she felt was clearly an attempt to mislead as she was standing in front of it.

Haidar narrated a few observations from her visit which are significant, even though she refrained from analysing their political implications.

For instance, she noticed that the number of Hindi-speaking Tibetans she encountered was much less compared to 2007. She linked it to the drastic reduction – from about 2000 to 100 – in the number of Tibetans successfully crossing into India.

She found that the Chinese government was now promoting inter-marriage in Tibet 'almost as a matter of state policy'. She confirmed this by referring to Chen Quanguo, the TAR Party Secretary's interview just a few days before their arrival. In this context, she noticed at the Shoton Opera (that was held during their stay) the display and replaying of the story of Princess Wencheng's marriage to 7th century Tibetan king Songtsen Gambo, as if to promote and legitimate the state's current emphasis on inter-marriage. She found numerous souvenirs and themes based on this. As an aside, she informed about another delegate – a Nepalese journalist – commenting that the Tibetan king had also married princess Brikhuti who was a Nepalese.

She agreed that concerns about the environment situation in Tibet was valid and hence had brought them up with the officials they visited. The officials had told them that studies were being undertaken and that the issue was being managed.

Optimistic assessment about situation in Tibet

Haidar also made many positive observations about the economic situation and the people's happiness. She also positively interpreted many of the contentious issues reflecting a sense of optimism.

For instance, she reiterated the argument that China seemed much more confident and in control now than ever. The forum on development held in Lhasa in August 2014 was cited as a proof of it for it had many foreign participants. While it was seen as an event to showcase China's achievements in Tibet, and even though she agreed that the final document reflected old CCP style proclamations, she argued that 'it did not take away from what the Chinese had achieved'.

Interestingly, she assessed the reduction of self-immolations in the TAR since 2008 (sic) as a sign of Chinese success. According to her, China does not feel the 'same pangs of nervousness' about the physical control of the region.

While she admitted her difficulty in accurately answering questions about the conditions of ordinary Tibetans, she commended the Chinese government for double digit economic growth in TAR, increasing living standards of Tibetan people who are better off than 20 years ago and also for the fact that the security was lower and less visible.

People seemed to be much 'happier' and 'joyous'. For example, in the Norbulingka area, people were allowed to pitch tents, organise picnics, conduct puppet shows and so on during weekends. This was remarkable for it reminded her of India gate type of freedom and access. In her interaction with a family comprising of a mother and two daughters, she noticed that the daughters could speak English and were positive and hopeful about the future.

Haidar commented that there were many Tibetans who had jobs in the malls now. She contrasted this with the absence of Tibetans in the lower Jokhang market area which now had all Hans running the kiosks. According to her, this may be a sign of prosperity since the Tibetans had hired out these shops to Hans and themselves taken up jobs in the malls.

While the Chinese language dominated all sign boards, they always had a Tibetan writing in them. She also noticed some English language boards coming up.

While 92 percent of TAR was populated by Tibetans, 49 percent membership of party was taken up by the Chinese. Further, while Tibet had never had a CCP party secretary, there were four prefecture level Tibetan party heads.

Overall, she felt that the level of freedom in Tibet was more and things were better than 2007.

What India needs to do

Her presentation also focused on how India needs to prepare to the changes in China's Tibet policy. For her, India must consider Chinese confidence in TAR as 'given'. According to her she had conducted an interview of the exile Tibetan leader, Lobsang Sangay before she left for TAR. She recalled him also making the same point about the changing outlook of Chinese leadership. Haidar strongly argued that China's current leader, 'Xi Jinping will handle Tibet'. She was convinced about it given Xi's powerful speech as vice president in Lhasa in 2012.

She also recalled a phrase used by Xi – we inherit problems but we must not leave it for our children – as indication of Xi’s open mindedness.

At this point, she reverted to the earlier point she had made about infrastructural development in Tibet. That it must not be seen as merely an attempt to bring prosperity to Tibet. That it is also an attempt to build a triangular defence system on its border with India, perhaps as an easier way to mobilise its troops.

She was certain that the talks between the Dalai Lama and Beijing were going on at some level. She was assured about it after the Dalai Lama’s interview to the Agence France Presse in early October. Even yet, she called on the Indian side for the need to develop a thought about life beyond the Dalai Lama. That it is important to now give up the leverage based outlook towards Tibet. We need to think outside the given framework and start paying attention to our neighbours. She was referring to the South Asian delegation members who were thoroughly impressed by China’s infrastructural development and prowess in Tibet. She recalled one South Asian journalist wishing China would build similar infrastructure in his/her country. She informed that Xi Jinping is slated to visit Nepal next year. That China has plans to build the rail line to Nyingchi, which is close to India. She however, called upon the audience to not perceive it as a threat or competition but as a sign that our neighbours have aspirations. That it is time for India to meet those aspirations.

Finally, she argued that it is also equally important to focus on and deal with the Tibetan population in India. She observed that young Tibetans were growing up in a ghettoised environment and being educated about an unreal world. That, as Tibet prospers, they are going to be more and more cut off from the reality there. Without a passport and citizenship, they face immense difficulties.

Discussions

The last point about the Tibetan population in India was considered positive and definitely worth taking forward by a member of the audience.

One of the issues that came up for discussion was about the nature of her visit. Since it was a guided tour there were limitations to how much she might have been able to see even in terms of the security presence in Lhasa. While conceding partially on the point, the speaker argued that things were much different than in 2007. And that she did try to see things of value given her experience with guided tours.

There was a related question about how different was her experience with the guided tour in Tibet from those she may have had in India, for example in Kashmir or Dantewada? While she did have minders, she had not experienced guided tours in Kashmir. She had two minders in Tibet – one was younger from Beijing and spoke English well. Another was an elderly gentleman who spoke less. There were also local Tibetans accompanying the group. She saw the minders as helpful translators during evening sojourns.

The speaker agreed with the assertion by an audience member that despite attempts to marginalise him, the Dalai Lama remained an important figure for the Tibetans in Tibet. This was evident in the way people prostrated before his shrine in Norbulingka and the stacks of money being offered in his name there. That despite the restrictions, Tibetans would definitely be possessing pictures of him. According to the speaker, even the officials

understood the importance of the 14th Dalai Lama and this point was reiterated a number of times during the course of the discussion session.

On the question about Panchen Lama, the speaker added that he remained a fabled figure with his pictures all over. However, she informed that this was not something she saw the officials stressing there now.

On being asked about her views about the Karmapa, the speaker regretted she had not raised questions regarding him. But she did inform that unfortunately, the Karmapa had not emerged as many had expected – as the next political leader being groomed by the Dalai Lama.

A comment from the audience sought to reassess some of the points made in the presentation from an alternative framework. Han salespersons dominating the market area in Lhasa, display of Han-Tibetan marriage at the Shoton opera, reduced number of police kiosks, reduced number of immolations in the TAR and so on were seen as a logical development of the success of China's demographic plan in Tibet and also as a sign of increased Chinese confidence in its control of the region. The reduction in number of immolations was to be seen as a success of China's security policy which does not require open policing. The speaker did not agree with the analysis that China had succeeded in solving its major problems of political resistance in Tibet through demographic means. She defended that she saw more Tibetans.

A more philosophical comment was made by another audience member about how 'there is no finality in history'. That it is important to take a long term view of things. Success should not be measured from the money spent. While the Chinese may have settled large number of Hans in Tibet, the settlement policy faces difficulties owing to the possibility that there may not be many Hans interested in settling there permanently. The speaker, citing the case of Kashmir, agreed that there is nothing called long term solution.

A member of the audience also questioned the speaker's analysis about the security situation in Tibet being better. Citing personal interactions with Tibetan students, he mentioned that it was getting increasingly difficult to contact families back home in Tibet. On this, the speaker agreed to disagree as she maintained that her interactions with locals suggested a different picture. She sought to validate her point by citing the example of call rates to Tibet from India being much cheaper now.

On another question as to how it was possible for the speaker to not discuss political matters, in her defence, the speaker argued that she found it a better way to discuss her visit.

Point was also made by a member of the audience about Xi Jinping's wife being a Buddhist and 'Dharamsala being a well penetrated place'. To another related question, the speaker asked the audience to acknowledge the growing number of Buddhist followers in China. This was seen as increasing the prospects of the Dalai Lama going to China on a 'pilgrimage of sorts'. She was especially surprised to be taken to the Lama temple in Beijing as a part of the guided tour there. She saw this as a sign of growing Chinese confidence and openness.

An audience member clarified that the refugee number escaping Tibet had gone down owing to Nepal's control of its border which is the main transit point for Tibetan refugees. On the question if anybody had confided in the speaker about plans to flee, she answered that it is doubtful if anybody would approach a journalist with such a matter.

However, she made the point that there were reports about many Tibetans from India trying to return to Tibet. A Chinese embassy official who was in the audience seconded her point that in 2014 alone they had received 1000s of applications. On prodding by an audience member, the official corrected that these ‘returns’ were to visit families, for reunions and so on and a very small number were to settle permanently.

On being questioned about her views about the self-immolations, the speaker mentioned that these were undoubtedly ‘very strong political statements’ and ‘ultimate acts of desperation’. She also informed that she had brought it up with most of the officials they met. In response they were told that the numbers were visibly coming down. She added that she was not sure about it and hence, had refrained from discussing this in her presentation. Another member of the audience mentioned that the number had actually increased.

On another question, the speaker counter questioned, ‘do we agree that the problems in Tibet are a result of economic backwardness?’ but did not elaborate further.

There was another question about what was the general reaction of the people to the delegation, especially towards the Indians given that they were coming from the land where the Dalai Lama currently resides. The speaker mentioned that there was lot of goodwill towards Indians among the Tibetan populace and some even enquired about him.

Overall, the speaker was highly impressed with the hospitality industry that she witnessed, which she termed ‘amazing’ ‘spectacular’ and ‘modern’. Watching the city of Lhasa all lit up at night was indeed ‘something’ according to her.

Report prepared by Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Suhasini Haidar is the Diplomatic and Strategic Affairs Editor at *The Hindu*. She is an award winning journalist who has travelled to several conflict zones and has interviewed many world leaders in a career spanning two decades. Prior to her current assignment, she was a correspondent for CNN International and the Foreign Affairs Editor at CNN-IBN.

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