



India-China Relations 1947-2000: A Documentary Study

Chair: Amb. Kishan S Rana

Speaker: Mr. Avtar Singh Bhasin

Discussant: Amb. Shyam Saran and Amb. Shivshankar Menon

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Conference Room, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)

The Wednesday Seminar hosted by the ICS on the 4th of April at ICWA was a discussion of Mr. Avtar Singh Bhasin's five volume book, a collection of 2523 archival documents on India China Relations from 1947 to 2000. Speaking to a full house, the discussion was set in motion by the Chair, Amb. Kishan S Rana who recollected working with Mr. Bhasin from 1973. He underlined the immense contribution of the volumes to researchers and practitioners by singling out one of the many evidences brought forth in them: a note produced by the MEA with the strategy for talks leading up to the official negotiations that lead to the 1954 agreement on Tibet. The Chair stated that the note betrayed a stark absence of any form of strategic thinking or perspective and officials hadn't applied their minds or thoughts into their negotiations. This, he argued, is a critical piece of knowledge because what could have been a short discussion, turned into a hard-fought negotiation that went on for months which saw India concede to much of assertive China's demands. He pointed out that the documents that have been brought to fore in the multiple volumes made it clear that there were serious flaws in India's negotiation doctrines in the past: there was no clear list of essentials that India had to hold on to and did not consider what China would possibly demand at these negotiations. He iterated that the wealth of material presented in these books provided insights into various aspects of statecraft of early India and was thus a treasure trove for anyone interested in the subject.

Mr. Bhasin, who has previously authored books and volumes of India's relations with its neighbours, began by mentioning that the confidence to take up the goliath task of compiling archival material from the MEA, came from the assurance he received from the highest levels of the Ministry about access he would have to them. He pointed out that although there was no blanket ban on access and was asked to observe caution while dealing with sensitive information from the past, in reality there was a complete ban. He said that while these

permissions turned out to be regulated, he did get access to the Nehru papers, a rich collection of 800 volumes, 400 thousand pages detailing domestic and foreign events. Regarding the methodology of going through this treasure, he mentioned that none of the documents were indexed, which meant that he had to go through every paper individually. Given that the archives were not properly looked after and were in debilitated conditions, a lot of the original documents risked being destroyed and therefore had to be handled with great care. He also mentioned that his five-volume collection on China only represents a portion of the wealth that the archives actually hold and that there is still great potential in exploring the rest. According to Mr. Bhasin, the ministry should actively work towards protecting its archival material and releasing records of those events that are not operationally sensitive anymore. He also deliberated on various important events mentioned in the volumes including the Simla convention, and how our current understanding of these events can possibly be reshaped by the details that emerge from the archives.

Amb. Shyam Saran and Amb. Shivshankar Menon, discussants for the talk, both paid tribute to Mr. Bhasin's contribution to the field by bringing to the fore the contents of the historical documents. Amb. Saran provided anecdotal accounts of his introduction to the Ministries archives as Foreign Secretary, the appalling state of the department and the changes that were brought about during his tenure, including digitizing over 6000 documents and creating a separate space for historians to refer to archival material. Talking about the significance of deciphering historical events, Amb. Saran recollected reading the Indian record of a meeting between Mao and PM Nehru and later reading a Chinese record of the same meeting, which turned out to be more detailed and graphic. Details such as this, he said, was not only important for their content and their layered connotations, but provided an insight into the sense of atmosphere at the time. He also pointed out that knowledge of history is crucial, especially for those involved in statecraft, as an absence of historical perspective could potentially lead to a repetition of the same mistakes. Amb. Saran also spoke about how the Indian negotiation strategy has improved with time with clearly defined thresholds and bottom lines. Amb. Menon attributed the primary significance of the volume to the importance of a Government getting its version of history out at a time when authoritative historical accounts are written based on unfounded information shrouded in Chinese opaqueness. In contentious issues such as Tibet and relations with the Dalai Lama, at a time when historians in Hong Kong are publishing politburo history, it is critical to get the Indian version of the stories out, he argued. He also stated that while the Chinese commentary took into account the international environment and perceptions, the Indian documents show that each event was analysed in isolation without placing it on a larger context.

The discussion was followed by a vibrant Q&A session after which anecdotes and comments from members of the audience were also shared. China's battle preparedness from 1959; Mao's domestic compulsions such as the failure of the Great Leap Forward; P. K. Banerjee's journey to China in 61; parliamentary debates regarding borders were some of the issues discussed. Amb. Menon drew attention to the 'seduction of the archives'. He argued that although documentary evidence of history possibly only reflected 30 per cent of what

actually might have gone on, without them there is no basis to begin building an understanding and was thus crucial to judge the rest of the 70 per cent. This rich volume therefore, starting with its 86-page introduction, is a treasure trove of insights for anyone captivated by the Sino-Indian relationship.

Research prepared by Veda Vaidyanathan, Research Associate, ICS.

About the Speaker

Mr. Avtar Singh Bhasin is a retired Director, Historical Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. During his tenure in the Ministry he served in Indian missions abroad. He was Senior Fellow at the Indian Council of Historical Research from 1994 to 1996, and Honorary Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Studies at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library from 1996 to 2000. As part of his academic research in the post-retirement period, he has produced five volumes each of documentary studies of India's relations with Sri Lanka (2001) Bangladesh (2003) and Nepal (2005) and another 10-volume study on India-Pakistan Relations (2012). He has authored two other books: *Some Called It Partition, Some Freedom* and *India in Sri Lanka: Between Lion and the Tigers*. Another of his book *India and Pakistan: Neighbours at Odds* is under publication from Bloomsbury. His latest book is a documentary study in five volumes 'India-China Relations 1947-2000,' published in January 2018.

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