



## **To Send or Not to Send: Indian Missions to Wartime China**

**Chair:** Patricia Uberoi

**Speaker:** Nirmola Sharma

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In this presentation, the speaker by extensively looking at little known archival sources analyses how cultural and goodwill missions originating from Colonial India to wartime China became a subject of intense political and strategic tussle between the colonial British Government and the political parties in India. The speaker argues that the British Government's decision to send or deny permissions to the missions to China was influenced by the necessity to keep China engaged in the war with Japan. Geopolitics of the war period and the need to keep Japan at bay not only played a role but countering the Russians particularly the Communists influence was also an equally important concern which made the colonial Government repeatedly deny permissions to missions of the Indians to China.

The speaker takes the earliest political linkages between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Kuomintang (KMT) as the reference point for the paper. The initial political contact between the Indians and the Chinese can be traced back to the First Internal Congress Against Imperialism and Colonialism held at Brussels in 1927. The INC leader, Jawaharlal Nehru had met Madame Chiang Kai-shek for the first time who was attending the conference as the Chinese representative. In the following years, the relations between the Congress and the KMT fostered. In India, the Congress tried to build a narrative of sympathy vis-à-vis the Japanese occupation of China. The Congress Party also passed resolutions condemning the Japanese occupation of China. To show their solidarity with China, in 1938, the Congress sent a medical mission to China. In 1939, Nehru himself visited China. In China these two

Congress missions received wide publicity. The immediate effect was the increase in the awareness about Indian political situation in China. In Chinese newspapers and public discourse, many people sympathized and supported the Congress' demand for complete freedom from Britain. The Congress had refused to support the British Government's war efforts without the assurance of independence. The reluctance of the Congress to support the war effort had led to an impasse in Indian politics. In fact, Chiang Kai-shek during his visit to India in February 1942 tried to mediate between the Colonial Government and the Congress and requested them to come to a common understanding.

Ms. Sharma brings to light the little known instances of Indian political parties and individuals (other than the Congress) notably the All India Hindu Mahasabha, the All India Muslim League, the All India Women's Conference, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Dr. Debesh Mukherjee who had earlier visited China as part of the Congress Medical Mission, to embark on their own specific missions to China. All of these proposed missions were denied permission by the Government to visit China. The objection to all the above mentioned missions to visit China was primarily for political reasons. The consequence of the success of the Congress delegations to China had to be borne by those who sought to follow in the footsteps of the Congress missions. The Government, on the contrary, reacted by drastically increasing its level of scrutiny and surveillance on these parties and individuals who sought to journey to China on proposed goodwill missions.

While the departure of the Indian missions to China was consistently obstructed by the colonial regime in India, it ensured that the British goodwill missions were sent off to China at regular interval. This was particularly true after the establishment of the Tripartite Alliance between Nationalist China, Great Britain and the United States of America. As Britain realised the importance of keeping China in the war to stall the Japanese from invading India, it embarked on an appeasement policy aimed at improving ties with China. This had been necessitated by the need to address and abate the widely prevalent anti-British sentiments that had been known to be prevalent in China. The speaker concludes the talk with the contention that by impeding the Indian missions while actively promoting British missions to China, the British Government made a distinction between Sino-Indian and Sino-British relations and promoted Sino-British relations at the cost of Sino-Indian.

*Report prepared by Ms. Nirmola Sharma, Research Associate, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

## **About the Speaker**

Nirmola Sharma is Research Associate at the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), New Delhi. She specializes in Chinese history and is particularly interested in studying Sino-Indian interactions in the colonial period. She has recently submitted her PhD at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi. Her Doctoral thesis studies the politicization of the Indian Community in China under the banner of the Indian National Army during the Second World War. She is the recipient of Institute of Chinese Studies-Harvard Yenching Institute Doctoral Fellowship for China-India Studies Program. She was a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for the Study of Chinese Civilization at Fudan University for the academic year 2014-15 and a Visiting Fellow at the Harvard Yenching Institute, Harvard University, for 2015-16. She was earlier awarded a Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD), Government of India, scholarship to study mandarin in China. She was part of an ambitious archival project to classify and catalogue materials related to modern China in the National Archives of India. The findings of the project, which she co-edited with Prof. Madhavi Thampi, was published as ICS Occasional Paper No.3, titled *Catalogue of Materials Related to Modern China in the National Archives of India Part I (Special Collections)*. The findings were also published as a Monograph titled *Catalogue of Materials Related to Modern China in the National Archives of India: 1939-45*.

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