



War, Memories, and National Identity: Assessing the Role of War in the Evolution of Modern Indian Identity

Speaker: Muhammed Kunhi

Chair: Patricia Uberoi

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Venue: Seminar Room, ICS

The event began with the Chair Patricia Uberoi's introductory remarks about the speaker, Muhammed Kunhi and topic of seminar. He has recently submitted his PhD dissertation on similar topic. Two major wars, namely, India-China war of 1962 and India-Pakistan war of 1965 have been analyzed as they occupy a significant place in the history of India's international relations. The presentation is based on data from four mainstream Indian English Newspapers - The Indian Express, The Hindu, The Times of India and The Statesman.

India-China 1962 War

The speaker began the talk by analyzing the pre-1962 war narratives.

Pre-1962 Narratives in India

Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist sentiments were prevalent in post-independent India. India was projecting itself as a champion of democracy. Non-alignment was adopted, and India had to act responsible to protect peace and stability in an ideologically divided world. India had emerged as a leader of Afro-Asian countries. There was a significant influence of Gandhian ideas, socially and politically. India had also projected to be a leader of demilitarization and denuclearization campaigns in the world. Unlike other Afro-Asian countries India did not attempt to suppress communist movements and accommodated communist parties in a democratic political system.

The speaker then examined three narratives on Non-Alignment from pre-1962 Indian public discourse to explain major features of Indian identity during this period. Firstly, the narratives on the views of Nehru and his supporters. Learning from India's colonial experience, they were strong supporters of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. They adopted anti-war and anti-militarization approaches. In this narrative, India's role as Afro-Asian leader was prominent and propagated international peace and security. They assumed that the non-alignment is the only way forward for a responsible state like India in that ideologically divided world which was expecting another world war. Second narrative comprised of supporters of the west. Following then dominant anti-communist discourse propagated by the West, in their narratives. Communism was considered as the most important threat.

Therefore, they largely discouraged the idea of non-alignment and demanded that India should join the West to defeat the communist menace. Lastly, the narrative of the communists and sympathizers. For them friendship with Soviet Union was the most important.

Three narratives on militarization were presented as Gandhian; Nehru and supporters; and realists. The narratives on the Gandhian view advocated for demilitarization and denuclearization campaigns, both within and outside the country. It was a period of anti-war movements around the world. India had achieved independence through non-violence. The narratives on the view of Nehru and his supporters were confident of the capability of Indian military. It was believed that India should focus on developing people's standard of life, not on building military capability. There was prevalent trust on international institutions and its effort for building peace in the world. Realist views asserted for developing military capability. Settling the dispute with Pakistan was a major concern.

Wartime and post-war narratives from 1962

First, Nehru and his supporters, repeatedly asserted that India cannot consider war as an option against belligerent China and had to rely on negotiation. There was an assumption that Soviet Union would stop China from entering into a war against India, in order to protect India-USSR friendship. A fight between democracy and dictatorship was projected. On one hand China was trying to destroy Indian democracy, as the Indian economy was developing through democratic means. On the other hand, Pakistan was the most important enemy trying to push India into war with China so that Indian military capacity is destroyed, and its defense is weakened in Kashmir. There was an emphasis on proving that non-alignment does not mean 'neutrality'. Second, supporters of the west, abandoned the policy of non-alignment, focused on the settlement of Kashmir dispute and forged India-Pakistan alliance against communist China. Lastly, there were strong anti-communist sentiments in the country. Revisionist-traditionalist division within the communist party had become more explicit. Radical fraction was trying to exploit the Sino-India tension. There were major changes in Indian public discourse in the context of 1962 war. Strong anti-communist sentiments had developed in India. There was a sharp decline in asserting Gandhian values. The need to develop military capability was accepted.

India-Pakistan 1965 War

Pre-1965 war narratives in India

Anti-Pakistan sentiment was prevalent in India as there were persistent tensions at border; Sino-Pakistan friendship had intensified post 1962 war and Hindu minorities were attacked in Pakistan. Pakistan was emerging as a leader in international politics, after India's defeat and humiliation in the Himalayan frontier in 1962. With the defeat in 1962, India lost its major Asian power status, it was no longer leader of Afro-Asian countries.

The speaker briefly explained the Kutch Aggression of 1965. Taking geographical advantage Pakistan effectively captured a portion of disputed Rann of Kutch area. Indian army had faced setbacks in the initial face (Kargil retaliation). American weapons had helped Pakistan. International pressure forced ceasefire by 30th April. India already had the status of a defeated country, setback in the Kutch added to it. Anti-Pakistan sentiments became prominent in Indian public discourse. Major narratives of this period were to retaliate and expose Pakistan as well as maintain trust in peaceful settlement.

Wartime and immediate post-war narratives from 1965

This period focused on proving India's worth at international front. India wanted to prove its strength to the world and defy its image of being afraid of war as portrayed by the international community since India's setback in 1962 war. India advocated it would not continue its peaceful approach towards Pakistan's steps challenging India's national integrity. India now aimed to declare, especially to the UN, that there will be no compromise on India's stand on Kashmir dispute. Shastri emerged as the best wartime leader.

Contemporary Narratives

Memories of 1962 war are alive in contemporary Indian public discourse. Unsettled borders, frequent tensions at the frontier and Pakistan sponsored terrorist activities are the major reminders of India-Pakistan war in contemporary Indian narratives. Chinese presence in Indian Ocean region and Pak-Occupied Kashmir are often presented as China's preparation against India in media narratives. Improvement in economic relationship have not transformed Indian social perception of China and Chinese threat. Indian media's wartime narratives revealed that both the wars contributed to alleviate India's internal differences by intensifying nationalist sentiments. 1962 war radically transformed Indian approach towards militarization and national security. 1965 war has changed India's image as a weak pacifist country of Gandhi and established that India will make no compromise on its national integrity. Though there were many factors, like anti-communist sentiments, adversely affecting Indian discursive image of China during the pre-war period, it is the war which established the enemy image of China in Indian public discourse. Since anti-Pakistan sentiments were prevalent in India and enemy image of Pakistan was dominant in Indian narratives even during the pre-1965 war period, the war didn't bring any significant change in India's discursive image of Pakistan.

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