

## **V P Dutt Memorial Lecture**

### **India as a Teacher by Negative Example: Chinese Perceptions of India during the British Colonial Period and their Impact on Contemporary India-China Relations**

**7 October 2020**

# **REPORT**

**Speaker:**

**Amb. Shyam Saran,**  
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**Chair:**

**Amb. Ashok K. Kantha**  
Director, ICS

## **V P Dutt Memorial Lecture**

### **India as a Teacher by Negative Example: Chinese Perceptions of India during the British Colonial Period and their Impact on Contemporary India-China Relations**

Wednesday, 7 October 2020 | 6:00 P.M. IST

The V P Dutt Memorial Lecture took place on 7 October, in collaboration with India International Centre (IIC) and support of V P Dutt – Gargi Dutt Foundation, with the Print serving as the media partner. V P Dutt Memorial Lecture began in 2011, following the death of Prof. V P Dutt, who was a pioneering Indian scholar on China with a long-distinguished career in research, teaching, and public life. Responsible for mentoring a large number of China scholars in India, he was known as a historian with in-depth knowledge of China's history, culture, literature as well as politics, foreign and strategic affairs. He was the first few students from India who visited China under an exchange program in 1958. A multifaceted personality, he made contributions in many fields going well beyond China that includes Indian foreign policy, matters of public life, peace and development. In the aftermath of 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, he persuaded then Prime Minister Nehru to support China studies in India. Thus, came into existence India's first China focussed centre in India at Delhi University in 1964.

The lecture began with a tribute to the scholarship of Prof. V P Dutt by ICS Director Amb. Ashok K. Kantha, who was also chairing the lecture, followed by an introduction to the life and contribution of V P Dutt by K N Shrivastava, Director, IIC and Ms. Anuradha Dutt, Managing Trustee of V P Dutt – Gargi Dutt Foundation. Delivering the lecture for the prestigious occasion, was Amb. Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary of India, who has also served as Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Nuclear Affairs and Climate Change. At present, he is a Life Trustee of India International Centre, Member of the Governing Council/Board of the Institute of Chinese Studies and Centre for Policy Research, a Trustee of World Wildlife Fund (India) and Member of the Executive Council of Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

The theme of the lecture – 'India as a Teacher by Negative Example' was dedicated to examining the perceptions held by the Chinese of India, and the influence this has had on contemporary India-China relations.

## **BACKGROUND**

India and China are locked in a standoff for the past six months. The clashes in the Galwan valley in June led to the deaths of a dozen troops on the Indian side and unnumbered deaths on the Chinese side. If the current standoff reflects anything, it is that the competition between the two Asian giants has intensified and made the future of the region highly uncertain. As the two countries and the world deal with a raging pandemic and heightened tensions on the Line of Actual Control, it is imperative to understand how China perceives India. Especially, when the tensions have upended any progress made over the past few decades and understanding reached on the Line of Actual Control through border agreements.

The legacies of the past still apprise the perceptions of the present. These perceptions continue to influence the relations between the two. The Chinese side interprets the Indian foreign policy behaviour through the prism of British rule in India – where it is viewed as having no independent agency. India is assessed through the prism of China's worsening relations with the United States. The Indian perceptions are also coloured mainly by the English language discourse on China, at times romanticising the China story and at other, depreciating it.

### **India as a Teacher by Negative Example**

Amb. Shyam Saran began his lecture by delving into the historical background of India-China relations. He noted that India and China enjoyed a thousand years of uninterrupted trade and cultural exchanges during the first millennium AD. This engagement flowed across the Central Asian bridgehead, through the Tibetan Plateau and the maritime links – connecting Peninsular India with the eastern seaboard of China. He pointed out that the spread of Buddhism in China became the prism through which China perceived India. These interactions were often interrupted by political turmoil and transitions in both nations and the intermediary realms. By the second millennium, these interruptions became more extended, and the relations between the two became more distant. The sense of familiarity which was present in India-China relations slowly faded away. The engagement continued, but at a lower pitch through the peripheries than between the centres of the two countries. He gave the example of the Port of Calicut, which maintained

flourishing maritime trade with China in the medieval period – which was described as the ‘pivot point’ for the seven voyages undertaken by the Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He. The Chinese vaguely understood the transition in India that happened with the fall of the Mughals in the 18th century and the emergence of British rule in India. Amb. Saran noted, it was only with the Opium wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60, that its vulnerability deeply shook China to a British empire in the east that drew its power and resources from the colonial empire in India. The humiliation of the Opium Wars led the Qing court and Chinese intellectuals to examine the reasons behind Chinese weaknesses, which also led to an exploration of the Indian condition and its role as a springboard for the painful assault on China. He noted that through this humiliation emerged, in parallel, a profoundly negative popular perception of India and deep resentment towards Indians, who were seen as the street side enforcers of the British rule. He pointed out that many Chinese intellectuals, whether conservative reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, or radical figures like Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, or Lian Shuming, saw India as the “worst-case scenario”.

Though India’s past and its brilliant civilisation was acknowledged, however, its more recent history was of special relevance to China if it were to become successful in confronting the powerful Western challenge. Amb. Saran argued that India was regarded as a negative teacher by negative example – a failed and fallen country, which was subjugated and enslaved without resistance from its people. He pointed out that many Chinese intellectuals like Zhang Taiyan explained India’s plight as a colonised country on the inherent character of its people. He noted that these intellectuals failed to see the irony of their blaming Indian’s supposedly flawed character for becoming prey to foreign rule and ignoring their own country’s history of being conquered and ruled by the Mongols in the 12th and 13th centuries and later by the Manchus during the 17th and 20th century. If the Indians were themselves responsible for falling prey to alien rule, then were the Hans during the Ming dynasty also responsible for falling prey to the Manchus? Were there similar character faults at play? Amb. Saran points out that these questions never surfaced in Chinese discourse.

He noted that during this phase of negative perceptions, even the positive history of Buddhism as a factor of affinity between the two nations was re-interpreted negatively, considered by some Chinese intellectuals as a baneful external influence that must be

thoroughly exorcised to allow the true China spirit to emerge. He points out that Chinese intellectuals like Lian Shuming, and later Hu Shih, argued for the complete elimination of the Indian influence in China and that not a trace of its influence should be allowed to survive in China. Shih, in his address at Harvard in 1937, blamed the “Indianization of China” for China’s inability to confronting Japanese aggression. The Chinese intellectuals also dismissed Rabindranath Tagore as a man of the past whose advice was irrelevant. Amb. Saran points out that the affinity between the two countries rekindled after Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 was more likely an exaggeration. He noted that individual Chinese interactions with Indians produced a more favourable impression. Leaders like Sun Yatsen and Chiang Kaishek held a more moderate point of view towards India, where the former avoided open disparagement of India but argued that British were a threat to China. Kaishek was sympathetic towards the Indian Independence movement; however, he was disappointed after the Congress Party refused to support the Allied counter-offensive against Japanese forces in China. He points out that when his Kuomintang (KMT) forces were defeated, and Mao established the People’s Republic of China, India’s prompt recognition of the new regime in Beijing soured any goodwill that may have remained. Moreover, despite the Indian gesture, PRC leaders remained suspicious and initially dismissed India as remaining under western influence despite its independence.

Amb. Saran points out that much of Chinese and Japanese readings of India during the first decades of the 20th century were derived through translations of British colonial literature which were openly and crudely racist in their depictions of India and its people. It is these mediated perceptions which have remained entrenched in Chinese attitudes.

### **Perceptions in the post-independence period**

Did these attitudes from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century persist, or was there a change in the Chinese discourse on India after the two nations were liberated?, Amb. Saran asked. He points out that when the relations between the two are in a positive phase, for whatever reason, there is an invariable harking back to the shared Buddhist heritage and the history of dense trade and cultural exchanges. However, whenever relations have become strained and contentious, the disparaging and negative narratives of the more recent past surface not only in Chinese media but also in records of Chinese

leaders' conversations with foreign interlocutors. He points out while India's economic development and self-reliance were praised, Chinese continued to perceive India as chaotic and disorderly, in contrast to China, where the authority of the state is indispensable to political stability. He noted that in the post-Galwan clash period, there was a relapse of abusive language and the making of false claims in the Chinese media.

He noted that while India's past glory as a great civilisation is acknowledged, in contemporary times it became an example of a failed and fallen country. He points out that China perceived India's present as the future that would await China if it did not reform and modernise if it did not unite and maintain a strong central authority. These negative attitudes persist and surface whenever relations start to worsen.

At the end of his lecture, he argued that in order to deal with the China challenge, India needs to analyse these deeper strands in Chinese perceptions of India and the prism through which Chinese mind interprets Indian foreign policy behaviour. These perceptions, mediated through third-party sources, are not the result of direct experience of India and Indians over an extended period. He also pointed out that images and imaginings pervaded by others also cover Indian perceptions of China. He argues that, currently, China is increasingly assessing India through the prism of its fraught and worsening relations with the U.S. India is not regarded as having independent agency. For the Chinese, the future can be relived in the past in which India once again becomes a platform for an assault on China and hence needs to be neutralised well in time. Its people and leaders cannot be trusted because they are by nature given to petty intrigues and trickery. He notes that history can be rewritten or re-interpreted to fit preconceived notions about an adversary's character.

For this reason, he argued that there is a need for more intensive China studies in India on Chinese history, culture and society and on the patterns of thought ingrained among its people. This exercise has two advantages. Firstly, it points the way to slowly but steadily removing the sludge of prejudice which animates much of Chinese behaviour towards India. Secondly, it opens the way for chipping away at our prejudices and uninformed notions about China and the Chinese people, thereby making a more productive India-China engagement more likely even if not inevitable. He argued that both sides need to shed the stereotype images they harbour about each other.

A distinguished number of guest asked several questions. One participant enquired about the irony of these perceptions held by China towards India and to use the British colonial period as a benchmark to highlight the superiority of its own culture. He also asked whether the perceptions held by China today, are also moulded by ideological underpinnings due to the rise of Marxism in China. To this Amb. Saran responded, pointing out that these negative perceptions of India held by Chinese were not limited only to Chinese left-wing intellectuals, but also by wider Chinese intellectuals. He also noted that the discourse on India as a teacher by negative example did not begin with Marxist intellectuals; however, he argued that the Marxist ideology might have reinforced these perceptions. Amb. Saran pointed out that the independence movements of the two countries and the liberation that followed was also seen differently in China, where the India independence movement was not seen as an emancipation of the people of India, whereas, the Chinese independence movement was seen as an emancipation of the people of China. The Indian liberation from British rule was also perceived to be hollow. Questions and suggestions followed pointed to the current perceptions held by Chinese in the times of digital age, whether China suffers from a historical inferiority complex, and that there is a need to look at the context of these negative perceptions that China has towards India.

The lecture closed with a warm token of thanks extended to Amb. Saran and participants by Director Ashok Kantha.