



Observer Research Foundation Mumbai

Forum for India-China Citizen's Dialogue

Newsletter

How Should India View China?

A Shanghai-Based Indian Journalist's Perspective



Thursday, 18th November 2010

Observer Research Foundation Mumbai's **Forum for India-China Citizens' Dialogue** hosted its inaugural talk, **'How should India view China?'** on Thursday, November 18, 2010. The talk was delivered by Shri Bivash Mukherjee, the first Indian journalist to work with *Shanghai Daily*, the only English-language newspaper in China's most prosperous delta region.

Shri Zhan Yuhui, Cultural Representative in the Chinese Consulate in Mumbai, was the Chief Guest at this well-attended event which attracted representatives of the corporate sector and business fraternity, students and the media, among others.

Forum for India-China Citizens' Dialogue is a new initiative by ORF Mumbai to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, arguably the most suitable Indian who acted as a bridge connecting the diverse cultures of India and China. The Forum will endeavour to promote closer people-to-people interactions for strengthening cultural ties between the world's two largest nations.



Shri Zhan Yuhui, Cultural Representative in the Chinese Consulate in Mumbai lighting the lamp to pay respects to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, as Shri Bivash Mukherjee and Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni look on.

The highlight of the talk was the screening of a film made by Shri Bivash Mukherjee, titled **"Gurudev – A Journey to the East,"** on the three visits made by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore to China, and its contemporary relevance in forging better ties between the two countries.

In an honest, freewheeling talk, Shri Mukherjee narrated his personal and professional experiences in a country, which since the turn of the century, has evoked a keen interest globally – an interest which is often laced with a trace of apprehension and suspicion. The fact that China will soon be the

world's leading economic power has created a buzz – and jitters. While China's military prowess is a known fact, many Indians, in particular, see China's fast growing economic might as a threat to its own economic security. That both the countries have engaged in a long-standing border dispute has only fuelled such feelings further.

However, Shri Mukherjee blew holes in many such misconceptions and prejudices that Indians harbour about its giant neighbour, with whom it shares a 3,500-km boundary, "however contentious it may be". According to him, the fear and threat perception stem largely because of the mutual ignorance about each other's peoples.

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"The Chinese are a very friendly and warm people," said Shri Mukherjee, who has been staying in Shanghai with his family since September 1999. "I can say this with tremendous conviction because all these eventful and interesting years have provided me with an opportunity to interact very closely with the local Chinese at every level – at work, on travel, at weddings, seminars, universities, hospitals and even at the marketplace," he stated.

He substantiated his impression of the Chinese by narrating his personal experience: "Both my kids were born in Shanghai and the help I got from the locals was simply astounding. My son, who turned four this month, was born with complications that needed him to be in the ICU for nearly two weeks. It was the most difficult and stressful two weeks of my life, but my office staff – all of them Chinese – were there with me at the hospital through this entire ordeal (made worse by the language barrier) even during unearthly hours! Never once did I feel alone and helpless in a foreign country."

He urged that despite all the irritants, there was a lot to be done to strengthen the bonds of mutual friendship with China which dates back to thousands of years. "Unfortunately, the importance of building these ties is lost on our bureaucrats and diplomats. The views of the diplomats and bureaucrats of both countries do not necessarily reflect the feeling of the people – I say this from personal experience. People get swayed by what appears in media reports... there may be some truth in them, but I frankly don't believe half of them," said Shri Mukherjee, who, as a professional journalist, has travelled far and wide in China.

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Shri Mukherjee also lamented the near total ignorance that both the people of India and China have of each other. "An average Chinese person's awareness of India is limited to Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, and even that is sometimes not very accurate. Of course, Raj Kapoor and his immensely popular film 'Awaara' are very well-known. On an average, eight out of 10 taxi drivers will be willing to hum the song "Awaara Hoon" gladly if you have the ear for it," he said, much to the amusement of the audience.

Apart from this limited knowledge about India and Indians, there is some amount of awareness about India's emergence in the global IT sector. "But for this, they don't really care about India. They do see us as an emerging rival and competitor, but other than that, there is no suspicion or apprehension about India among the average Chinese. However, there is surely a lot of ignorance," he said, pointing out that seeking business opportunities through a lot of entrepreneurial innovations was a single-minded preoccupation for an average Chinese in Shanghai.

Illustrating some of the feedback that he regularly got from his Chinese colleagues and friends “which harks back to the old stereotypes”, Shri Mukherjee added that by and large, “the level of ignorance about India is unnerving,” so much so that he has been asked – much to his consternation and humour – that if West Bengal was on the India’s east coast, why was it called ‘West’ Bengal? Here’s what he commonly heard about India:

- ✦ A lot of people in Shanghai, especially those of the older generation, don’t have a very good impression of Indians. This is largely because of historical reasons: During the period when the country was under the British colonial influence, a lot of Sikh policemen were posted in Shanghai, and they were quite unpopular.
- ✦ India is a poor and dirty despite the enormous progress it has made. “That is an image that has stuck and doesn’t seem to wash away. The recent coverage of the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi only added to it. The pictures from the newswires were downright repulsive.”
- ✦ That all Indians can dance and sing, thanks to our movies.
- ✦ That we were a country of countless Gods, festivals and temples.
- ✦ They do not understand India’s politics. “Political parties – JD, BSP, NDF, DMK, AIADMK, BJP, CPM... – all these abbreviations are very confusing to the Chinese. They would rather understand one entity as they have at home.”

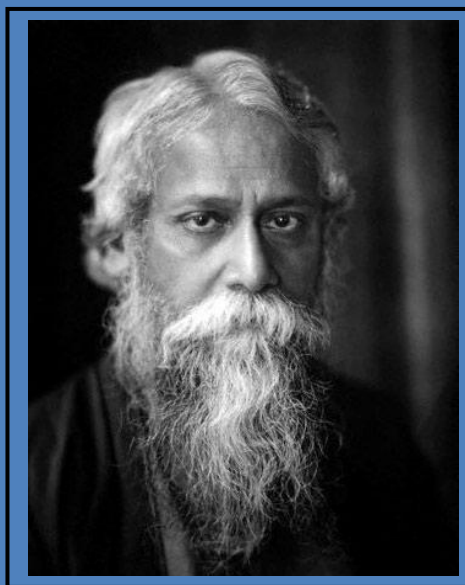
However, he was quick to mention that this high level of ignorance wasn’t one-sided. “People in India seem to be as clueless and disoriented about China. Our own understanding of China is limited to *chow mein* and other vague dishes that are non-existent even in China!” he said. “Every visit back home throws up the usual impertinent questions: What do they eat? Are they friendly? What do they think of us? Such ignorance is bound to be, because despite the presence of over 5,000 Indian students in China doing medicine alone, we don’t hear much about them even in our own newspapers,” he added.

Indian authors like Premchand and R. K. Narayan could be very popular in China.

He exhorted the governments of the two countries to do much more to bridge the vast cultural divide that exists at present. For this, he appealed for the use of the wider sphere of cultural affairs comprising educational, artistic and sporting activities that are abundantly present in our two countries, which are an essential part of international relations, more so in this era of global competition.

“We have so much more to showcase; we have to go beyond Bollywood in representing India. We must have regular and frequent student exchange programmes, who will return with a better understanding of each other. A bilateral exchange of ideas and setting up of friendship societies could also forge a better understanding and appreciation of the other. But indeed, if this relationship has to grow, it is necessary to expand the people-to-people contact rather than restrict ourselves to just economic and political ties. **And that also means easing visa restrictions,**” he said, pointing out there was “tremendous literature available in both countries which could become instantly popular if translated in each other’s languages.” “Authors like Premchand and R. K. Narayan could be very popular in China; similarly there are some great Chinese authors who could soon develop a major fan following here,” he added.

Shri Mukherjee concluded his talk by quoting Tagore, who in a speech at the opening of the Cheena Bhavan in Shantiniketan in 1937, showed his daring vision of a unified Asia to the world, where the two great countries would play a major role. Gurudev had spoken of “an ancient pledge implicit to our past... to maintain the intercourse of culture and friendship between our people and the people of China. An intercourse, whose foundations were laid eighteen hundred years back by our ancestors with infinite patience and sacrifice.”



“I have come to ask you to reopen the channel of communication. Let what seems a barrier become a path, not in spite of our differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away; and life would be so much poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living.”

-GURUDEV RABINDRANATH TAGORE

In his opening remarks, Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni, Chairman, ORF Mumbai, described the Forum for India-China Citizens’ Dialogue as an effort by ORF Mumbai to facilitate greater interaction between the people of the two most populous countries of the world, who were inheritors of the two oldest civilizations of the world, and also in the 21st century, the two most important countries in the world.

“As two mature civilisational nations, we should be confident of resolving all problems and differences through dialogue. This is really very important for the people of the two countries who have the greatest stake in peace,” he said.

He pointed out that while business and commerce between India and China were increasing, it was not enough. “The process of building peace and cooperation between India and China should not be left only to diplomats, bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians –some of whom are doing a very good job – but we must involve the people of the two countries in this exercise,” he said.



The audience listening to Shri Bivash Mukherjee with rapt attention.

During the question and answer session that followed his talk, Shri Mukherjee touched upon several interesting issues. Given here is a snapshot of his views:



Shri Bivash Mukherjee addressing the audience on 'How Should India View China?' at ORF Mumbai.

About Chinese

Despite having economic, social and political issues – just like everybody else all over the world – Shri Mukherjee described the Chinese to be very accommodating. “By and large, they are quite happy, contented. They know that prosperity has come for a price, after huge sacrifices made by an entire generation. They still have their political, economic and social issues, but they don’t complain,” he said. In his own view, the Chinese, especially the vastly entrepreneurial ones like in Shanghai, “are having one big party – recession or no recession – and it doesn’t seem like ending anytime soon.”

Shri Mukherjee also said that some of his colleagues in Shanghai had spoken of their admiration of india’s social and political system. He quoted from a recent editorial in *Shanghai Daily* which chastised district officials in Beijing for agreeing to spend US\$7.5 million for “study trips” to the United States. The editorial argued that “while America has a lot to offer to China, Beijing should learn from India on how to treat poor citizens in a humane way!” The editorial moaned that “Beijing treated poor street vendors like underdogs, while most Chinese cities copied too many things western to the detriment of traditional Chinese values.”

A misunderstood lot

Shri Mukherjee also belied the general impression that the common Chinese people are apprehensive of its government. “For me, the faith they have in the communist party and those in power is both astounding as well as frightening. Strangely, for some reason, this is not the picture we get when we read all the stories about China in the world media. The real thoughts of the people there are not really understood and communicated at all. This is really strange as rarely – very rarely – does anybody talk about China being a fun and friendly place, and the least bit hostile,” he said, pointing out that among all the major powers, China has been the least aggressive militarily.

He also said that there were no restrictions on movement of foreigners in the rural parts of China, including Tibet or Xingjiang. “I have not heard of anybody who has had any trouble visiting to any part of China. I have personally travelled across the lengths and breadths of China without any problem. For that matter, I have not heard of anybody who has been denied the special entry visa that you need for Tibet,” he said.

Historical ties with India

- ✚ “I was amazed to read a recent article by noted Sino-Indian historian Prof. Tan Chung who wrote that the English word ‘China’ originated from India. The Chinese refer to their country as Zhong guo, but it is known to the rest of the world as China. Prof. Tan quotes from Kautilya’s Arthashastra (which was composed in the 4th Century BC) where he has referred to an Oriental land called Cheenabhumi: “...*kauseyam cinapattasca Cinabhumijah*” – or the country of China.
- ✚ “Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore’s three visits to China during the 1920s helped renew the historical ties between the two Asian countries which began during the reign of Emperor Ashoka who lived from 266 BC to 232 BC when Buddhism made its way into the Middle Kingdom.”
- ✚ “During a trip to Xiangyang in central China I was heartened to discover three Ashoka Stambhas, with their back-to-back lions. These pillars have survived the vagaries of time and political upheaval of the 60s and the 70s. Understanding and respecting different cultures can only further goodwill. Such synergies can bridge differences and have the potential to influence and shape future ties. It’s all the more imperative that we build on this.”
- ✚ “Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis, who devoted his life to the selfless service of the Chinese during the second Sino-Japanese war in 1938, is revered in China as a legend, an epitome of the great historical friendship between India and China. At the annual QingMing festival where the Chinese pay homage to their ancestors, you should see the amount of flowers they put at the statue of Dr. Kotnis in Shijiazhuang.”
- ✚ A former Gurudwara – which is now a residence – epitomizes the presence of the Sikh community, which was present in Shanghai in the 19th and the early 20th Centuries. There is a reference to it in hockey legend Dhyani Chand’s autobiography when he stopped in Shanghai during his trip to the Los Angeles Olympics in 1932. “The Gurudwara has a huge historical significance. Today, this structure on 326 Dongbaoping Road stands as a protected site – without any Indian intervention, mind you. They are aware of its role in their history,” Shri Mukherjee said.

Gurudev's influence

While the Western world put Tagore on a pedestal around the 1920s and forgot him soon after, or worse, rejected him as an Oriental mystic with outdated spiritual ideas, China's interest in Tagore has resolutely endured. "Tagore visited China just three times in the 1920s, but he is the most widely translated foreign author in Chinese after Shakespeare. Today the interest among the young Chinese and academics is at a new high. You have so many fans of Tagore's poetry in China... so many blogs and online discussion forums to discuss the meaning and influence of his works in the context of modern times and a fast changing Chinese society," Shri Mukherjee pointed out.

"His Pan-Asian view may seem a bit utopian now – or even then, but then how many had foreseen such a spectacular growth for China and India? The new-found status of these two nations in the world makes it doubly imperative that they carry Tagore's message of universal goodwill and humanism across the world," urged Shri Mukherjee, who played a significant role in paving the way for the installation of Gurudev's statue in Shanghai, which was unveiled by President Pratibhatai Patil in May 2010.

About his film "Gurudev – A Journey to the East"

The film is about the Chinese perception about the three momentous trips made by Gurudev Tagore to China and his budding friendship with a young Chinese poet Xu Zhimo, with whom he stayed in Shanghai. The film also captures Chinese thoughts on the controversy that followed his first visit to China, while also bringing to light Gurudev's vision of a unified Asia that he perceived in the 1920s.

According to Shri Mukherjee, the film would not have been possible without the enormous support of his Chinese friends who helped him to dig out old records and files from archives and libraries. "The film on Tagore and digging out invaluable information involved considerable amount of time and money – close to year-and-a-half. Half the material was in old Classical Chinese and it wasn't easy even from them to decipher – but they never failed me. I never paid them anything but for an occasional meal or a cup of tea after a day's work. Thus, for me, it was more about building interpersonal relationships. Being friends helps a lot. You have to understand and respect their sensibilities, their culture and their style of working. They knew throughout I had no money to pay and I was not getting any funding from anyone. It was simply a very personal effort."

Freedom of press

"They have limitations, of course. Newspapers have to take most of the Xinhua (official Chinese news agency) copies. The English press carries local stories from only the local reporters," Shri Mukherjee said.

However he pointed out that while the freedom of press was restricted in China, "it should not be construed that they are an ignorant lot... far from it. They are as much politically aware as much as the rest of the world. The internet is buzzing with information. People are talking on the net all the time. They discuss all things under the sun, which can be a bit scary because it veers to the extreme levels. This creates a lot of misinformation as well which is then passed on as news... They do envy India in that regard," he said.

Human rights

Shri Mukherjee said that human rights were a “very big issue” that would take an endless debate, especially from the Indian perspective of the subject. “At the same time, they have made Shanghai, and probably much of China, among the safest cities in the world. Even New York and Manhattan are not safe at all hours. I can say from my personal experience. In Shanghai, there have been occasions when my wife and children have had to travel by public transport at 12.30-1 in the night and never once have I had any second thoughts. It helps as Chinese women work round the clock at all public facilities like departmental and convenience stores or drive taxis even in the dead of the night. That surely is one right guaranteed where many others have failed.”

Corruption

It's there, but very rarely would one come across instances of corruption in day-to-day life. “Importantly, even if there is some amount of corruption, they deliver,” he said, adding that Indian businessmen who dealt with China in trade and commerce would be better able to comment on this aspect. “On a personal level though, I have not encountered any corruption in public life – hospital, police stations etc. not at all.”

Perception of Pakistan

People are largely ignorant about Pakistan, even more so than India. The perception among the common Chinese people is zero. I have not heard anybody in entire China talking about Pakistan at all, except the oft-repeated that they are old friends of China. The media never really bothers about Pakistani news except for accidents and calamities.

Language

Language is something you need to work on, as some of the literal translations into *Chinglish* can be funny and embarrassing. There also issues with singular and plural, verbs, tenses etc. They don't even have separate gender pronouns and confusion rules as a “he” could be easily referred to as a “she” and vice-versa. Shri Mukherjee narrated some personal experiences about the misunderstandings caused by such gender neutrality that had the audience in splits.

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About Shri Bivash Mukherjee



Shri Bivash Mukherjee, who belongs to Mumbai, is the first Indian journalist to work with Shanghai Daily, the only English-language newspaper in China's most prosperous delta region. He has been working with this newspaper since it first rolled out of the presses in 1999. He was among the select few who were given the task of bringing out a fresh new newspaper in English in Shanghai, as the city, with a large international population, became China's gateway to the world.

Since 1999, Bivash has witnessed China's spectacular emergence as a global economic powerhouse with an incredible synergy between people's entrepreneurship and state planning and execution. No other city showcases China's entrepreneurial vibrancy better than Shanghai, which is what Mumbai is to India. He was out on the streets of Shanghai as China celebrated its winning bid for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The pace of transformation has doubled with Shanghai hosting the WORLDEXPO 2010, the most successful five-month-long global business exhibition that ended in October. Bivash has witnessed how China faced the wrenching challenges arising out of the economic meltdown in the West. He has travelled extensively in all parts of China and closely interacted with its people. His special interest has been to gauge Chinese people's attitude towards India.

Prior to working in China, Bivash was in Bangkok for seven years with local publications – first with The Nation and later with Business Day before venturing into Russia where he worked with the Moscow Times. He started his journalistic career in Mumbai with the Current weekly and later joined The Independent newspaper before moving abroad in 1992.

About Forum for India-China Citizens' Dialogue



Forum for India-China Citizens' Dialogue is a new initiative by ORF Mumbai to promote closer people-to-people interactions for strengthening ties between the world's two largest civilization nations.

In today's rapidly changing world, friendship and cooperation between India and China is critical for regional as well as global peace, stability and progress.

About ORF Mumbai



Observer Research Foundation (ORF) is a leading non-partisan Indian Think Tank that seeks to influence public policy formulation. It was established in New Delhi in 1990 by the late R. K. Mishra, a widely respected public figure, who envisaged it as a broad-based intellectual platform pulsating with ideas needed for India's nation-building.

In its journey of twenty years, ORF has brought together leading Indian policy makers, academics, public figures, social activists and business leaders to discuss various issues of national importance. ORF scholars have made significant contributions toward improving government policies. ORF has produced a large body of critically acclaimed publications.

Until recently, ORF's activities were based mainly in New Delhi. Beginning 2010, ORF Mumbai has been established to pursue the Foundation's vision in India's business and finance capital. It has started research and advocacy in six broad areas: **Education, Public Health, Inclusive Development, Urban Renewal, Youth Development, and Promotion of India's Priceless Artistic and Cultural Heritage.**

ORF Mumbai's mission statement is: *Ideas and Action for a Better India.* It will champion the cause of balanced socio-economic development and a better quality of life for all Indians. It will also work towards strengthening India's democratic institutions to become more responsible, responsive and sensitive to common people's needs and concerns, especially those of most vulnerable sections of the society.