

ht think!

REFLECTIONS

chanakya



DOKLAM: WHY CHINA IS ANGRY WITH INDIA

All the elements of drama in high places are there. Six thousand soldiers from the world's two largest countries are eyeball-to-eyeball, sometimes literally, on a remote chunk of Himalayan rock. The media on both sides is baying for blood. Amid all this the leaders of both countries are crossing paths in a far-off continent, trying to avoid discussing the crisis. One reason they aren't: Neither has a formula for resolution besides the other side playing dead. Best then to wait, watch and keep your powder dry.

The real story may be elsewhere. India and China have some spectacular run-ins every few years. The present stand-off is dwarfed by the Sumdorong Chu incident along the northern border of what is today called Arunachal Pradesh. That lasted from the summer of 1986 to the autumn of 1987 and, at one point, China and India had mobilised over 100,000 soldiers between them. Not only did the two sides eventually agree to pull back, it paved the way for Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's historic State visit to China. What seems to decide whether a bump-in-the-Himalayan fog becomes a big fiasco are the other untied threads running through the fabric of Sino-Indian relations—and that the pattern they weave keeps chang-

ing. On one parameter that Doklam does not differ from previous incidents is that none of the troops involved are using weapons. The soldiers are involved in a bit of push and shove but they are abiding by the existing border management agreements—meaning the two armies would look to Dabangg and not Rambo for their rules of engagement.

The differences arise elsewhere. One is that India is decisively intervening on behalf of Bhutan. The Chinese have long nibbled at Bhutan's borders without India doing too much about it. Atop the Doklam plateau the Chinese army has been making paths, converting them into roads and then pouring concrete on them as part of a pattern of slowly encroaching on the Bhutanese claim area. Standard Sun Tzu meets-Chinese bulldozers stuff. The Indian military are clear this plateau matters to them. If China were to take it over, the tri-junction of the India-China-Bhutanese border would actually move southward several kilometres. In jargon-speak that would bring a swathe of Sikkim and North Bengal under long-range Chinese artillery fire.

What is more important is the strategic messaging. One, there is no evidence Beijing would not move the goalposts of its territorial claim further south if it were able to secure the Doklam plateau. As the last US president, Barack

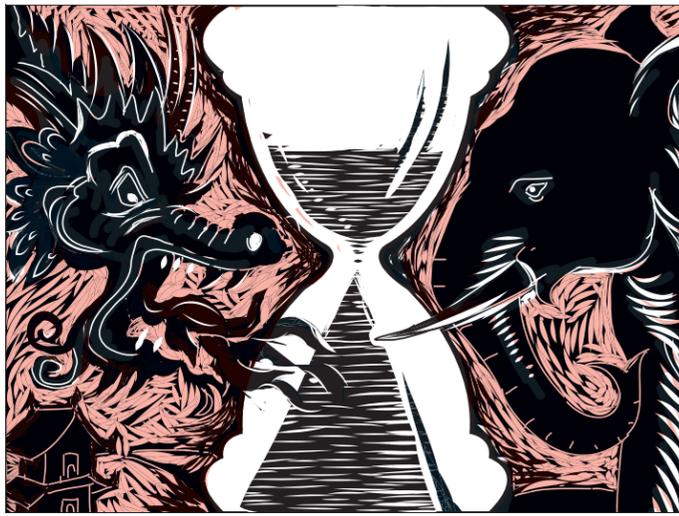


ILLUSTRATION: SUDHIR SHETTY

Obama, said of the Chinese regime, "You also have to be pretty firm with them, because they will push as hard as they can until they meet resistance. They're not sentimental...so simple appeals to international norms are insufficient." He conceded most of the South China Sea before he grasped this.

The second message is in India's decision to stand up for its closest ally. Until now, Thimpu has buckled before Beijing in part because it was uncertain if India would have their back. Many "friends of India" have been eaten by geopolitical lions because they ran into trouble at a time when New Delhi had slipped into a bout of navel-gazing. In this case, the Narendra

Modi government decided to block the Chinese military road-building team and say, "Bhutan's fight is our fight." Much of Beijing's outrage is its surprise that, in its eyes, India has unilaterally changed the rules of the game.

It is not only India which has suddenly begun drawing its friends closer. In recent years Beijing has aligned itself even more closely with Pakistan, giving Islamabad a veto over anything dealing with India. New Delhi, on the other hand, has been quietly forging linkages with the likes of Japan and, more nascently, Germany to counter Chinese grand strategy. If one thinks Modi travels a lot, Xi Jinping began travelling a week after assuming the presidency

and spent the equivalent of five months of his first four years overseas.

The Doklam stand-off is now into its fourth week. Perhaps just to fill the time, the Chinese government has grumbled about India helping Bhutan and the Dalai Lama visiting Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese media has vented on every outstanding source of friction from India's opposition to the Belt-Road Initiative to India's defence ties with the United States. The 1962 war has inevitably been raised. Presumably, if Doklam drags on into the winter, the invasion of north Bihar by a Tang dynasty expeditionary force may also come up.

China, already the world's number two economy, still cannot fully make up its mind how to function, talking about a "pacific" rise to power one day and then being short-sightedly aggressive with all its neighbours the next. Curiously, the two seem to be rubbing up against each other more over third countries than they are against each other directly.

Pakistan is becoming both a source of strength and weakness as China shifts from being that troubled country's friendly neighbour to its legal guardian. Bhutan is probably more than surprised to find thousands of Indian troops arriving to support territorial claims most of its citizens are barely aware of. New Delhi and Beijing need to recognise that they are both different countries today from what they were even five years ago, let alone 1962, and will be different countries again five years hence. Assuming neither really wants a genuine dust-up, then a franker, more frequent sharing of minds about the world is needed to keep the worst of the relationship to pushing, shoving and wild-eyed news anchors.

sundaysentiments



KARAN THAPAR

IT'S BEEN A MOMENTOUS TWO DECADES INDEED!

Today Sunday Sentiments is 20 years old. It can now claim to be an adult column! However, the elements of juvenility that you frequently glimpse are a true reflection of my personality. I'm a child at heart. For some, in fact, a spoilt brat. The moments of sententious pontification—and I have to admit there are a few—may come easily but they're not really me.

I have often been asked what is 'the true story' of Sunday Sentiments. This morning, somewhat self-indulgently, I have decided to give you a potted version of it. It's an interesting if quaint story.

Sunday Sentiments began as a diary. The first, on the 6th of July 1997, boastfully recounted a dinner with then Prime Minister Inder Gujral. I couldn't hide the fact I was delighted to have been invited. Sadly, beyond that point and a few other details I didn't have very much else to report.

Showing-off was my real intention and purpose!

Over the years Sunday Sentiments has developed in many directions. First, it's travelled right across the Hindustan Times. It began on the outer page of one of the weekend supplements. At that stage it was a diary. Then, developing wandering feet, it entered Brunch but only for a brief temporary sojourn. Perhaps feeling out of place, Sunday Sentiments fled the magazine for the op-ed pages of the main paper. There it's stayed ever since.

Here, surrounded by the wise, Sunday Sentiments developed its present form. It became a single issue column although its length, under pressure of space, kept shrinking. It also acquired a split identity. On occasion it transformed into an eccentric if not idiosyncratic column.

This schizophrenia permitted me to speak with two voices: one for serious



A photograph of the first-ever Sunday Sentiments column, which appeared in HT on July 6, 1997

reflections on major issues of the day, the other to ventilate quirky ideas and even, occasionally, jokes and frivolous thoughts.

Either way, the aim was always to inform or entertain. Rarely was it to preach. Indeed, when expressing an opinion became inevitable—or irresistible—I tried to do so by raising questions that would prompt the conclu-

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sion I was pushing at rather than assert it upfront.

Did I succeed? I'd like to think so and often, when people asked about my political views, I felt I had because that suggested they were unable to glean them from what I had written. But my critics were always sure they knew and they weren't always wrong!

I've now written 1,040 columns over two decades—one every week. Column lengths have changed over the years, but at a conservative estimate, that's the best part of a million words. If I say so myself, that's an achievement both the paper and I can be proud of.

Over the years these columns have been published in two collections by different publishing houses. A third should be out soon.

Finally, this Sunday, I want to thank you, my readers, for your loyalty and support. That's the sole reason why this column has survived for so long. And the day you start turning the page without pausing to read these sentiments I'll know the end has come.

The views expressed are personal

engender



LALITA PANICKER

WOMEN'S SAFETY NEEDS IMAGINATION

It is a story we hear very often—a woman on her way to work or on an outing uses some or other form of public transport only to face harassment, even rape. It could be a rogue cab, auto or bus driver. This was driven home in a most terrifying manner in 2012 when Jyoti Singh, a young paramedic, unwittingly boarded what she thought was a city bus on what would be the last journey of her life. What happened to her on that bus where savages inflicted the worst sort of violence on her should have been a wake-up call for the authorities to provide easily available and safe public transport for women.

Most women have faced some form of harassment in public transport. And this has increased over the years as more women have stepped out of their homes to work. In a wonderfully comprehensive draft on women and urban transport, the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy and Safetyplan have gone into this issue at length, coming up with sensible recommendations which if they see the light of day could transform their lives in urban spaces.

Let us take Kerala, supposedly enlightened and educated. A study by Sakhi in 2010 quoted in the draft shows that in Kozhikode, 71% women faced harassment while waiting for public transport while a whopping 69% faced it while using public transport. We only sit up and take notice when this harassment spills over into actual violence like rape. The daily stress and harassment that women in public transport face has become normal now, something we disapprove of but something no one sees fit to tackle.

Harassment is thrown into the bucket of other complaints by the authorities who seem to have neither the inclination nor the wherewithal to deal with the seriousness of the problem. Much-hyped helplines are launched

with fanfare, but they tend to fall between the cracks thanks to poor implementation. Many women don't even know about helplines even where they are available.

We hear of zero-tolerance in many spheres of public life, particularly corruption. It is quite a favourite with our politicians because it has such a final and muscular ring to it. As the draft shows, it can be used with good effect when it comes to women's safety in public transport. Women should be encouraged to join the public transport companies in greater numbers. In Bengaluru, the Metropolitan Transport Corporation created a Women's Safety Committee which comprised the security and vigilance department, police, traffic police, commuters' association and other civil society bodies. The goal was to create a protocol to deal with sexual harassment in public transport and infrastructure, according to the draft.

When designing public transport, approaches to it and waiting areas, it makes sense to involve gender experts. The solutions could be as simple as a well-lit road to a well-lit bus stand. It could be as simple as more women constables on railway platforms. Or gender-sensitised taxi and bus drivers.

Women only vehicles have been tried but they are not economically feasible. For the economy to grow, we need women's participation and for this we need safe public transport. This is something our city planners need to focus on. Women's concerns have to be a part of city planning, not an afterthought. In urban India, only 15.5% of the workforce is women. If they were assured safe passage to work, this figure could double. But this requires imagination and innovation on the part of planners and the government, something in short supply these days.

deepcut



RAJESH MAHAPATRA

INDIA NEEDS A WAR ON ROTE LEARNING

It is that time of the year when most undergraduate colleges in India are nearing the end of the admission process. Hundreds of thousands of exam-weary high-school students, with many a harassed and anxious parent in tow, will have learnt of their fates. There will be winners, having gained the colleges and the courses of their choice, alongside those compelled to make do with plan B. A good chunk, however, will also find themselves left out in the cold. Others will explore greener and costlier education pastures overseas, while there will also be many herded into for want of a better term—degree granting shops.

The transition from high school to college in India, as we have begun to realise, is at bursting point—not merely in the sense of not having enough quality institutions for the demographic youth bulge, but mostly

over the rising despair about the kind of students being produced by our schools. If one goes by the percentage of marks, then it appears that a good number have barely made an error over the course of a punishing three-hour exam. This includes, surprisingly and especially for my generation on the wrong side of the 40s, in subjects such as literature, history and the range in the social sciences. One remains in wonderment over how 'objective' such subjects can possibly be? And how remarkable can the grading be that it seems to discover only the infallible, year after year.

And yet, India is also plagued by the growing problem of the 'educated unemployable'. According to some studies, only one out of four graduates coming out of engineering and professional colleges in India are found suitable for employment. That number drops to one out of 10 when it comes to

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general education. Many of our engineers and those freshly minted out of the vast network of universities have poor abilities to frame problems, suffer from grim language skills and suffer from the most basic crisis of comprehension. Inadequacies and failings that can all be unambiguously traced to poor education, something that may be worse than having no education at all.

Among policy makers and corporate honchos these days, there is a lot of talk about the urgent need to harness employability among Indian graduates through curriculum changes, adoption of global best practices, deepening industry-university links, soft skill training and so on. But none of these would address the problem that lies at the core of the Indian education system—rote learning.

The education system we have built over the years rewards anything but knowledge acquired over the years spent in a school or a college. From the time a child enters the school, she is

taught to believe the result of an examination is more important than how it is achieved. A 17-year-old budding historian is tested on his ability to recall and remember events rather than evaluate and analyse the social, political or economic implications of the same. What good will memorising mathematical and scientific formulae do if an aspiring scientist or engineer fails to apply them to the world around her? That is why even the best of schools in India fare worse compared to the average-rated schools in the OECD countries. That is why no one any longer speaks of India's youth bulge as a demographic dividend. It is, as we speak, fast turning out to be a liability of monstrous consequences in the time to come.

It is time we launched an all-out war on rote learning. It is not going to be easy, for undoing our reliance on rote learning would mean outcomes that will be financially overbearing and politically unpopular. It would require courage and perseverance of the kind we demonstrated when we made universal basic education a fundamental right. Now is the time to redefine the ambitions of the Right to Education Act, which must mean the right to quality education.

(For a longer version of the column, visit www.hindustantimes.com/columns/rajeshmahapatra)

thisweekthatera

July 9-July 15, 1967 >>FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

JULY 13: Wednesday's (July 12) strong shower, which broke the extended dry spell in the national capital, was sharp enough to slow down cars and immobilise this Tonga (pictured here)



NEWS OF THE WEEK



INDIA
FLOODS CUT OFF ASSAM RAIL LINK
JULY 10: Rail communications between Assam and the rest of India were snapped today (July 9) as the flood waters of Pagladia, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, damaged the railway track between Nalbari and Ghorapara in Kamrup district.



WORLD
ISRAELI DOWN UAR PLANE OVER SINAI
JULY 12: Israeli anti-aircraft gunners today shot down a Russian-made Egyptian Air Force plane over Sinai. The plane, a Sukhov-7 jet fighter-bomber, was the second shot down by Israel within three days

Indirect taxes hit the poor hard

Apropos Rajesh Mahapatra's column ('To succeed, GST must be a win-win for all' Deep Cut, July 2), GST can streamline our indirect tax collection. But what India needs is not a GST regime which is another avatar of indirect tax but a direct tax regime that has helped countries to get developed status. While direct taxes depend on the taxpayer's ability to pay, indirect taxes—being blind to economic status—hit the poor the hardest.

SUJIT DE, KOLKATA

Look at the positive side

It refers to the column 'To succeed GST must be a win-win for all'. There is no doubt that there would be more than teething troubles for the small business setups and traders which do not use computers for their accounting purposes. But we all need to see the larger picture here, this is indeed the biggest tax reform in our country.

BAL GOVIND, VIA EMAIL

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