

The Chinese Betrayal, Early Warnings Unheeded

Lessons from Sardar Patel and Sri Aurobindo

by

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[An Article in 2 Parts if required]

Part - 1

The Crisis Today and National Amnesia

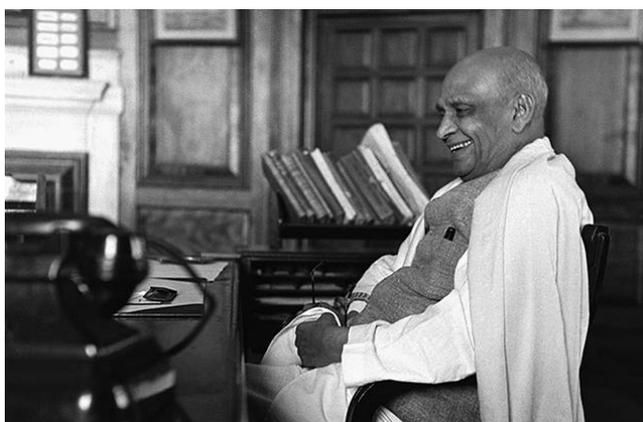
It is often said that ‘those who forget history are condemned to repeat it’. The truth of this adage is seldom realized. With the brutal and savage killings of unarmed Indian soldiers by the death squads of the People’s Liberation Army, [PLA] and the brazen claims of China over the entire Galwan valley of Ladakh and other vital territories that historically belonged to India, we seem to have come full circle from the debacle of 1962 when the nation had been given a deadly body blow by Chinese aggression in the then NEFA [now Arunachal Pradesh] and other areas currently under the gaze of Chinese expansionism. Despite the passage in time, history seems to repeat itself. What is the way out? Could some of the earlier missing narratives help in our understanding as a new India is emerging?

Axiomatic wisdom

It has become near axiomatic in most circles today that war and even limited wars, can never be the answer to conflicts among nuclear-armed nations, and diplomacy and dialogues are the only effective antidotes to war. The former U.S. Ambassador to India John K. Galbraith, was fond of using President John Kennedy’s oft cited phrase : ‘Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.’ While self-blame may not be the answer, we can ill afford complacency and absence of genuine introspection, based on a sense of history that could take us out of the current impasse. In this context, it is worth recalling pages from Indian history dating back to 1950.

Sardar Patel’s last letter to Pandit Nehru regarding the Chinese invasion of Tibet: November, 1950

In his letter dated 7 November 1950 before his passing on 15 December of the same year, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the then Home Minister, wrote to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, cautioning him and the nation about the looming threat from China which went beyond the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Citing evidence from Intelligence and showing a remarkable sense of geopolitical understanding, he held out a scenario that he thought would be catastrophic to the safety and security of the entire North East of India including Assam on account of Mao’s design on Tibet as a first step in his expansionist plans.



[Source: <http://www.friendsoftibet.org/sardarpatel.html> accessed on 23.6.2020]

He wrote:

My Dear Jawaharlal,

Ever since my return from Ahmedabad and after the cabinet meeting the same day which I had to attend at practically 15 minutes' notice and for which I regret I was not able to read all the papers, I have been anxiously thinking over the problem of Tibet and I thought I should share with you what is passing through my mind.

Although not in the best of health, the Home Minister showed an amazing alertness of mind and political acumen. He cited essentially nine sound reasons as he saw them, including the appreciation of the military and intelligence position, an appraisal of the strength of our forces, the question of the Chinese entry into the U.N. especially in the context of its active participation in the Korean War, measurement of internal security in the border areas, improvement of our communication, road, rail, air and wireless, in these areas and with the frontier outposts, the future of our mission at Lhasa and the trading post of Gyantse and Yatung and the forces which India had in operation in Tibet to guard the trade routes, and finally, the policies in regards to McMahon line.

Patel drew the following conclusions which seem to have been largely ignored given the subsequent course of events. His views and advice do not seem to have outlived his own times. He added significantly:

In the background of this, we have to consider what new situation now faces us as a result of the disappearance of Tibet, as we knew it, and the expansion of China almost up to our gates. Throughout history we have seldom been worried about our north-east frontier. The Himalayas have been regarded as an impenetrable barrier against any threat from the north. We had friendly Tibet which gave us no trouble. The Chinese were divided. They had their own domestic problems and never bothered us about frontiers. In 1914, we entered into a convention with Tibet which was not endorsed by the Chinese. We seem to have regarded Tibetan autonomy as extending to independent treaty relationship. Presumably, all that we required was Chinese counter-signature.

Patel was pragmatic enough to note that the Chinese would have a radically different perception of boundary divisions based on colonial rule especially agreements signed by the British with Tibet, Burma and the other political units of India's North East. He therefore argued that:

We can, therefore, safely assume that very soon they [the Chinese] will disown all the stipulations which Tibet has entered into with us in the past. That throws into the melting pot all frontier and commercial settlements with Tibet on which we have been functioning and acting during the last half a century. China is no longer divided. It is united and strong. All along the Himalayas in the north and north-east, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnologically and culturally not different from

Tibetans and Mongoloids. The undefined state of the frontier and the existence on our side of a population with its affinities to the Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of the potential trouble between China and ourselves.

Patel was equally perceptive about the expansionist nature of international communism. Soviet Union during World War II was a glaring example of this trend. He went on to declare:

*Recent and bitter history also tells us that communism is no shield against imperialism and that the communists are as good or as bad imperialist as any other. Chinese ambitions in this respect not only covered the Himalayan slopes on our side but also include the important part of Assam. They have their ambitions in Burma also. Burma has the added difficulty that it has no McMahon line round which to build up even the semblance of an agreement. **Chinese irredentism and communist imperialism are different from the expansionism or imperialism of the western powers. The former has a cloak of ideology which makes it ten times more dangerous.** In the guise of ideological expansion lie concealed racial, national or historical claims. The danger from the north and north-east, therefore, becomes both communist and imperialist. [Emphasis added]*

At this point, Patel made a distinction between the threat from Pakistan vis a vis the newly emerging threat from China. It is this new threat, a greater menace, that needs our attention, he argued:

While our western and non-western threat to security is still as prominent as before, a new threat has developed from the north and north-east. Thus, for the first time, after centuries, India's defence has to concentrate itself on two fronts simultaneously. Our defence measures have so far been based on the calculations of superiority over Pakistan. In our calculations we shall now have to reckon with communist China in the north and in the north-east, a communist China which has definite ambitions and aims and which does not, in any way, seem friendly disposed towards us.

After arguing out his case, in conclusion, Patel made the following urgent suggestions to Pandit Nehru:

These are some of the questions which occur to my mind. It is possible that a consideration of these matters may lead us into wider question of our relationship with China, Russia, America, Britain and Burma. This, however would be of a general nature, though some might be basically very important, i.e., we might have to consider whether we should not enter into closer association with Burma in order to strengthen the latter in its dealings with China. I do not rule out the possibility that, before applying pressure on us, China might apply pressure on Burma. With Burma, the frontier is entirely undefined and the Chinese territorial claims are more substantial. In its present position, Burma might offer an easier problem to China, and, therefore, might claim its first attention.

I suggest that we meet early to have a general discussion on these problems and decide on such steps as we might think to be immediately necessary and direct, quick examination of other problems with a view to taking early measure to deal with them.

Yours,

Vallabhbhai Patel

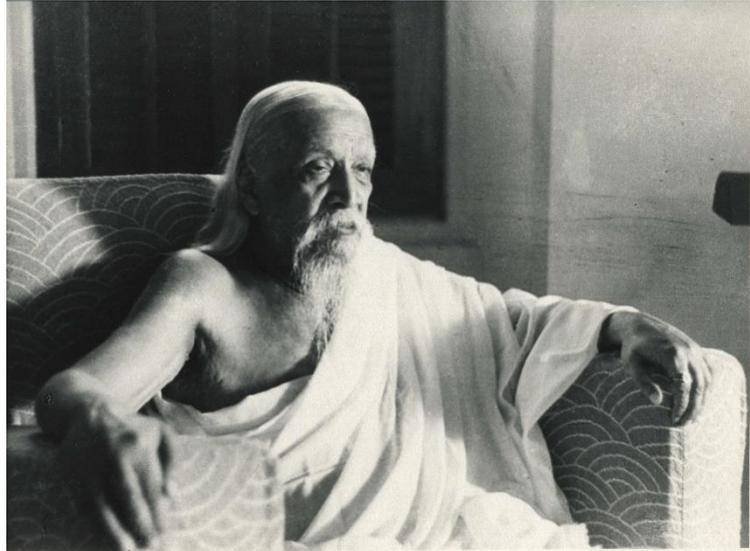
The political knowledge of the region and the astuteness of analysis that Patel demonstrated in the letter was simply masterly. As always, he was futuristic in his approach to the issues at hand and agonized about India's territorial integrity. To say that his views are dated and are to be seen in his context, would be to have blinkers in our eyes regarding the current crisis and the insufficiency of existing approaches.

It is not clear what steps if any Nehru and the Govt of India took before or after the passing of Patel on 15 December 1950, but later history would prove the folly of ignoring his basic warning to the nation. Despite the later adulation to the Sardar, his China warnings seem to have been missing in the policy domains. The role of the military and civilian top brass including the Defence Minister Mr V.K. Krishna Menon during the 1962 crisis has been well recorded and do not need any repetition here.

Part-2

Sri Aurobindo's Last Testament on the Invasion of Tibet: 11 November 1950

In an uncanny manner, **in the same month of November, within a gap of only four days, on 11 November, 1950**, another great Indian nationalist and world-visionary Sri Aurobindo, sent out into the public domain, his last political testament through an approved editorial of his 'own paper' *Mother India* whose editor was K.D.Sethna. Sethna would later testify this fact as follows: 'Not only were my editorials



written under his inner inspirations; they were also sent to him for approval. Only when his 'Yes' was wired to us did we plunge into publication.' [K.D.Sethna, *India and the World Scene*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Society, 1997 From the 'Introduction'.]

Abiding political interest till the very end

It is worth noting that unlike many other Indian spiritual thinkers, Sri Aurobindo never lost interest in the nation and the world from the political point of view. This is borne out by the many statements he made from time to time on national events, and the letters he wrote such as the letter to C.R.Das [1922] and Joseph Baptista, [1920] his Messages during World War II, [1940-43], Messages to Stafford Cripps during the Cripps Mission, [1942] the Wavell Plan [1945], the Cabinet Mission Plan, [1946] the Independence Day Message, [1947] Message after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, [1948], Letter on the Kashmir Problem [1949] Message sent after the outbreak of the Korean War. [1950], Letter regarding the Nehru-Liaquat Pact and After [1950], On the Communist Movement [1950] and so on.

Sudhir Ghosh shares Sri Aurobindo's Last Testament with President John F. Kennedy

On 28 March 1963, Sudhir Ghosh, the Indian Member of Parliament and famous emissary of Gandhiji and later of Jawaharlal Nehru, met with the President of the United States John F Kennedy in the White House and shared the last testament of Sri Aurobindo that had appeared in *Mother India* on 11 November 1950 before Sri Aurobindo's passing on 5 December 1950:

As Ghosh records in his memoir, the President read with attention Sri Aurobindo's testament:

The basic significance of Mao's Tibetan adventure is to advance China's frontier right down to India and stand poised there to strike at the right moment and with right strategy, unless India precipitately declares herself on the side of the Communist bloc. But to go over to Mao and Stalin in order to avert their wrath is not in any sense a saving gesture. It is a gesture spelling the utmost ruin to all our ideals and aspirations.

Sri Aurobindo's views on totalitarian Communism was an established fact reflected in his letters and socio-political writings. Freedom, he declared, was indispensable for human progress.

What then is the way out in the crisis in Tibet? The editorial continued:

The gesture that can save is to take a firm line with China, denounce openly her nefarious intentions, stand without reservations by the USA and make every possible arrangement consonant with our self-respect to facilitate an American intervention in our favour, and, what is still of greater moment, an American prevention of Mao's evil design in India. Militarily, China is almost ten times as strong as we are, but India as the spearhead of an American defence of democracy can easily halt Mao's mechanized millions.

After citing the reasons in political and military terms, the editorial raised the discourse to a higher moral and spiritual level; it saw the responsibility as civilizational and concluded in the following words:

*And the hour is upon us of constituting ourselves such a spearhead and saving not only our own dear country, but also South-East Asia whose bulwark we are. **We must burn it into our minds that the primary motive of Mao's attack on Tibet is to threaten India as soon as possible. [Emphasis added]***

[Sudhir Ghosh, Gandhi's Emissary, New Delhi: Routledge, 2008, pp.277-78. First published in USA, by Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967. Also see, Sri Aurobindo: A Contemporary Reader by Sachidananda Mohanty, Routledge, 2008; rpt. 2016, pp.221-222]

Ghosh continues:

The President read the words of Sri Aurobindo's last testament several times over and said: 'Surely there must be some typing mistake here. The date must have been 1960 and not 1950. You mean to say that a man devoted to meditation and contemplation, sitting in one corner of India, said this about the intentions of Communist China...

He was somewhat shocked. 'So, there you are,' said the President. 'One great Indian, Nehru, showed you the path of non-alignment between China and America, and another great Indian Aurobindo, showed you another way of survival. The choice is up to the people of India.

Earlier in the meeting Ghosh had shared with the President, Nehru's letter, and this is how Ghosh records the reaction of Kennedy who was frankly quite indignant:

The President read it slowly and carefully and ruefully remarked: 'He [Nehru] cannot sacrifice non-alignment, eh? Are the people of India non-aligned between Communist China and the United States? I don't believe that anybody in India is non-aligned between China and the United States—except of course the Communists and their fellow travellers.' Then some thing fell from his lips which was perhaps unintentional. He indignantly said that only a few months earlier when Mr Nehru was overwhelmed by the power of Communist China he made desperate appeal to him for air protection, and non-alignment or no non-alignment, the President had to respond. He added sarcastically that Mr Nehru's conversion lasted only a few days. He was impressed to see the speed with which the Prime Minister swung back to his original position with regard to the United States. [Gandhi's Emissary, p.276.]

Today as we keep wrestling with the question of the Chinese intrusions into the Indian territory, more than five decades down the line, and their growing demands and claims for our lands, it is worth recalling the two forgotten chapters from Indian history in the 1950.

Epilogue: Nehru, Tibet, America and the India- China War of 1962

Despite being a watershed moment in the nation's history, the records of the 1962 War, seen from the Indian side, are safely locked up in classified files. The Top secret T.B. Henderson Brooks and P.S. Bhagat Report [Henderson Brooks- Bhagat Report in short] is yet to see the light of day. [Excerpts from this top-secret review can be found at www.indiandefencereview.com, www.indiatoday.com and www.nevillemaxwell.com] What we have instead is Neville Maxwell's somewhat erroneously titled *India's China War*. New Delhi: Nataraj, 2013. which pins the blame unfairly on the Indian side for Nehru's forward policy.

We may meanwhile read Bruce Riedel's excellent book based on the declassified documents from the US Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]: *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA and the Sino- Indian War*, Harper Collins, 2016, [First published in USA by Brookings Institution Press, 2015] to realize the prophetic nature of Sri Aurobindo's last testament in *Mother India*, and Sardar Patel's early warnings. For, we learn, as indicated in the extracts from Ghosh and Bruce Riedel, cited above, that towards the end of the '62 war, Indian and American sides had hammered out a secret military agreement for providing American aircover and the supply of armaments to Indian military during the 1962 crisis, As Nehru argued in a top-secret message to Kennedy in 1962, [while asking effectively for roughly 350 combat aircraft and crews with matching personnel, radar and logistical support for the operations], the issue was 'not merely the survival of India, but the survival of free and

independent Government in the whole of this sub-continent or in Asia.’. He added that India would ‘spare no effort until the threat posed by Chinese expansionist and aggressive militarism to freedom and independence is completely eliminated.’ [U.S. Department of State Outgoing Telegram for Am embassy, New Delhi 2167, November 19, 1962. John F Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum: India; subjects: Nehru correspondence, November 1962:11-19. Quoted in Riedel, p.138.]

However, the Chinese abruptly ended the war on 19 November and declared an armistice. They had launched attacks in the West (Aksai Chin) and East (Northeast Frontier Agency) on 20 October 1962. Despite the protests by Ayub Khan and Pakistan, the American logistical support to India continued especially with regard to the raising of the new Mountain Divisions of the Indian Army, a relationship that existed most fruitfully during the Kennedy Administration. More could have been expected had he continued in office and not been tragically assassinated.

It is time we reminded ourselves of the prophetic words of Sardar Patel and Sri Aurobindo as we face renewed threats across the Himalayas. It is true the situation today is different from the one in 1950 or 60s. And yet the validity of the lesson remains: the firmness with which both spoke regarding national security has not lost its relevance. Even as we seek to avoid war and seek all avenues, diplomatic, political, economic, administrative and logistic; we must come together with like-minded groups and nations, establish partnership in the neighbourhood, across the Atlantic, the EU, the Asia Pacific regions, and the UN. Indeed, we must stand firm and resolute on our borders and recall the words of Sri Aurobindo to defend the nation with utmost strength and resilience.

As one of the editorials approved by Sri Aurobindo had said: ‘There are certain values that have to be upheld and no dread of consequences should unnerve us...But, if we are brave and far-seeing, there may not be this war...’

[K.D.Sethna, *India and the World Scene*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Society, 1997, pp.249-50]

Prof. Sachidananda Mohanty is widely published in the areas of British, American and postcolonial studies. He is the author of acclaimed volumes, including one on Indo-US Educational Exchange [Foreword by J.K.Galbraith]. Formerly he was the Senior Academic Fellow at the American Studies Research Centre [ASRC] Hyderabad. He is an honorary consultant to Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry. **Views expressed are personal.**
