

# India Through Chinese Eyes

LI XIN



**B**EIJING—Between dawn and dusk, on the 18th floor of a glass-walled office tower in the north fourth ring road of Beijing, thousands of editors working for Sina, a portal that includes Sina Weibo's 500 million users, survey a myriad of news sources, snatching more than 10,000 items to display on its site. It is China's most popular news portal and largest aggregator. Its news section, with its vast audience, plays a major role in shaping the nation's media consumption.

Of this selection, on one random day—October 28—only 50 items deal with India, China's largest neighbor, and the world's second most populous country. Half of these pieces could barely pass for news—migratory birds mistaken for drones and a 17-year-old girl who hung herself because she had no access to Facebook. A few items deal with an explosion in New Delhi that killed eight people. The selection is rounded out with a small number of minor financial updates—a rise in onion prices and India buying Italian helicopters and Chinese railway parts. Yet October 28 was no ordinary Monday. It was just three days after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wrapped up a rare state visit to Beijing that received little of the coverage it deserved. Important talks on trade and border negotiation were largely ignored by the mass media.

Singh's visit to Beijing coincided with that of two other prime ministers—Russia's Dmitry Medvedev and Mongolia's Norovyn Altankhuyag. The headline was the big oil deal signed by Russia and China. Singh did manage to squeeze into Chinese news websites' more prominent headlines—but only for a visit to the Forbidden City with his Chinese counterpart, Li Keqiang.

#### BLIND SPOTS

Media coverage is a vivid snapshot of the much broader tableau of China's perception of India. Despite its size and proximity, India is a gigantic blind spot in China's foreign policy. On the rare occasions when India comes to mind, it is usually for its association with other, apparently more pressing countries—the United States,

Pakistan, or Tibet. Serious discussions are sporadic and often overwhelmed by exotic tales. "Among China's neighbors—Russia, the Koreans, Japan, even as far as Iran—Chinese interest and accumulated knowledge towards these countries is much, much stronger than it is towards India," says Yu Longyu, director of the Center for Indian Studies at Shenzhen University. Deep-rooted in its history, Chinese ignorance towards India is alarming.

For most urban Chinese, the terms that spring most readily to mind regarding India are rape, Buddhism (despite the fact that fewer than 1 percent of Indians are Buddhists), and yoga, while rural Chinese would tell you they have few associations, if any. By contrast, a town meeting taking place in a small village near Udaipur in Rajasthan state tells a different story. A local organizer introduces a Chinese visitor to the crowd of male migrant workers coming home for the holidays, and asks them what they know about China. They sit silently. Finally one shouts, "China mobile!" The workers immediately echo his cry, waving their cell phones in mid-air.

Penetration of Chinese goods into Indian society, like in many other countries, is high. But India has few raw material or high-tech products to close the trade gap, and its traditionally strong exports—textiles, television sets, and speakers—are also important to China's competitive advantage. Since joining the World Trade Organization, the Chinese market has increasingly opened up to foreign imports—Brazilian soy, Argentine beef, European luxury goods, and American gadgets. But Indian brands are notable for their absence. India's renowned service giants—

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pharmaceuticals, information technology, and financial institutions—have only just begun their march into China.

Bilateral trade between the two nations totaled a respectable \$66.5 billion in 2012, but it was heavily one-sided. India's deficit was \$28 billion, and it's continued to rise this year. China is India's largest trading partner and largest contributor to its trade deficit. The two countries have pledged to increase the total trade to \$100 billion by 2015, but how large a gap will remain is still unresolved. The inbound and outbound investments are largely out of proportion to the two countries' size and economic weight. By the end of 2011, the total Indian investment in China was \$442 million, while Chinese investment in India ballooned to \$55.6 billion. This is a significant improvement from a very low base. In 2004, China's outstanding investment in India was barely \$5 million. In the following years, there was a build-up of capital from China, mostly concentrating on buying resources, or setting up Chinese low-end IT equipment or consumer goods manufacturers to cater to the vast Indian market. But Chinese investors are still relatively new in India.

In addition to being somewhat absent from Chinese media coverage and business activities, India has also seen little increase in tourism from China. This is despite the huge surge of Chinese nationals heading abroad, and the hip "Incredible India"—a decade-old, government-driven international campaign with TV commercials and events, showcasing the richness of Indian culture.

The state-owned China International Travel Service is the country's largest and, for several decades, only overseas guided tour provider. In its offices in 122 Chinese cities, colorful brochures are displayed, showcasing foreign resorts with a heavy

mix of heavenly pictures and catchy slogans, including the "Myth of Autumn Leaves" (Japan), "Smelling the Forest" (Malaysia), and "Blue Romance" (Turkey). Of the 125 foreign tour packages, however, only two include India. If that wasn't enough of a deterrent, these are accompanied by a long list of warnings—don't touch heads of children; don't ask strangers to take photos for you, or your cameras could disappear; don't give money to panhandlers, or they will ask for more; don't go to undeveloped areas by yourself; and don't take food from strangers since it might contain drugs.

In short, India is hardly a popular destination among Chinese tourists. Given the heat, violence, and public health issues, many are altogether deterred from

making the journey across the Himalayas. The Chinese National Statistics Bureau's annual BRICS report showed that for the nation's two large neighbors, Chinese were the fifth largest group touring Russia in 2011, but only 11th in India—representing a mere 0.2 percent of Chinese yearly overseas tourists. By contrast, some 610,000 Indians traveled to China.

"China is crowded, polluted and chaotic enough. Why go to another country to see the same thing?" suggests a specialist at the national travel agency.

#### DEMOCRACY MALFUNCTIONING

In official discourse, China's largest neighbor is often cited as a prime example of why democracy doesn't work. India, known as the world's largest democracy, is deemed dysfunctional. Indeed, China

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### THE STRENGTH OF THE JUDICIARY HAS A DIRECT IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS AND BUSINESS ALIKE.

and India chose very different paths. China favors, at least in form, a top-down authoritarian system, while India features a bottom-up, highly fragmented power map. In terms of the role of government, the two countries are very much on the two ends of the political spectrum.

During my first trip in India, in 2010, a morning newspaper in the city of Agra ran a front page report of a disastrous fire that had begun near the home of the world famous Taj Mahal. Firefighters came to the rescue only after two hours, by which time several members of a local family had died. On the same day, most Chinese news websites ran a headline story about a forced demolition in southern Jiangxi Province. Protesting against police and government officers who wanted to tear down their house and appropriate it to build a bus station, three members of the Zhong family rushed to the rooftop, doused themselves in gasoline and set fire to their clothes. One died; two others were seriously injured. Two tragedies happened on the same day, but while one found a government absent from its duty, the other demonstrated a heavy-handed state machine pushing through its agenda at all costs.

When the Chinese discuss the corruption and inefficiency of Indian government, they often overlook its resolutely independent judiciary. Taking shape in the 1950s and based on English common law, India's courts are independent of all other parts of the government. Though hardly free from corruption, from time to time courts even clash with the executive branch. In China, courts are funded directly by governments, at times subject to the heavy hand of their influence.

The strength of the judiciary has a direct impact on individuals and business alike. Jiang Jinlong was accustomed to the

old days of hard negotiations with Indian iron ore companies. The Chinese businessman spent more than 10 years importing iron ore from India, Brazil, and Australia. "Brazilians are like Europeans in their sense of law, and Australians would be meticulous in drafting a contract and obeying it, but Indians tend to have the British respect of law combined with an Asian type of myopia," says Jiang. "They can obey the law when it's to their benefits, but brush it aside when it doesn't."

Jiang stopped importing iron ore from India about three years ago, since the Indian government levied high duties and banned mining entirely in key states. By then he had launched several lawsuits against Indian suppliers, but admitted that his legal battles were quite unusual. "Chinese businessmen are reluctant to resort to law to solve overseas disputes," says Jiang.

#### EXPRESSION & CORRUPTION

Another fundamental difference between these two systems is freedom of expression and the press. Inevitably, exposure of corruption is higher in a more transparent society than in one which issues frequent gag orders. Indeed, direct elections in India are frequently surrounded by scandals. The practice of democracy, rather than the spirit, is often the center of talk among Chinese who keep an eye on their neighbor. In January 2012, *Qiushi Magazine*, published by the Central Party School, the Communist Party's training academy for officials, released a paper, "Does Democracy Check Corruption?"

"While democracy is widely expected to control corruption, by commonly used yardsticks, democratic India has done no better than China at checking corruption, and may even have fared worse," wrote the authors, Sun Yan and Michael Johnston. "(I



n the absence of economic development, democracy may have particular vulnerabilities to corruption, as economic development involves not just resources, but also institutions protecting opportunities and assets while restraining excesses and abuses. Thus, prospects for reform in a poor democracy are not encouraging, even by comparison to liberal authoritarian regimes.”

As a central theoretical organ of the Communist Party, *Qiusbi* is most influential among politicians and scholars. And it's had its own share of reflections on India. One Op-Ed in its relatively liberal newspaper offshoot, *Study Times*, on September 10, 2013, observed that after India's independence, the country was ruled by members of the Nehru-Gandhi family 60 percent of the time, while another 12 percent of the time a member of that family was effectively wielding power. Among members of parliament, 37 percent of the 41-50 age group, 65 percent of the 31-40 age group, and all members under 30 inherited the position from their parents. “For a society still tinted with feudalism, which sets rules according to clan loyalty and personal worship, regular direct election won't bring substantial differences,” concluded the author Ge Xuesong, adding that India is “democratic in form, authoritarian in content, and disappointing in result.”

Such discussion inevitably filters down to the Chinese masses, clearly not persuaded that the flaws of democracy mean the entire system should be voided. At Tencent, the nation's second largest news portal and Sina Weibo's principal competitor, a special report explores why democracy can't cure India's corruption. An accompanying survey that poses the question of whether democracy can cure corruption has almost 9,000 replies. Some 85 percent say, “Yes.”

Catering to a mass audience, the special report has a clear and pointed summary of its articles. Small-scale corruption is everywhere in India, while large-scale corruption continues to expand. Contrary to conventional wisdom, direct elections, judicial independence, and media freedom fail to stem corruption. Political parties are similar and equally corrupt. Moreover, the general public seems to tolerate petty corruption. India's economy bears the hallmarks of a planned economy, and its transition offers rich rent-seeking opportunities, a term popular with Chinese media and academics to describe officials using power or their control of key resources to seek profits.

Last fall, the new Chinese leadership commissioned an in-depth look at India's corruption. It's no surprise that India's political, judiciary, and social fabric were examined through the prism of Chinese current affairs.

More systematic study of India is possible, though, and Beijing has directed several universities to do as much—but the reality is still far removed from the ambition.

#### WHO STUDIES INDIA?

At one of China's top universities, a two-person South Asia center was tacked onto the America Study Center, disregarding the fact that India's foreign policy is resolutely independent of both the United States and China. Moreover, a lecturer at the university remarks that when a group

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CHINESE  
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of Indian scholars recently visited the South Asia Center, the staff ordered beef for dinner—a gross error that unintentionally reflected the second-tier position of India studies in China’s academic universe. It has a long tradition, but lacks investment and depth today. The studies fall into two categories: Indology for history, cultures, languages, and literature of India; and current South Asia studies focusing on geopolitics and economy.

Liu Zhen, a young researcher educated in Germany, now teaching at the National Institute of Advanced Humanistic Studies of Fudan University, wrote an analysis on the status of Indology—“a subset of foreign literature studies, and dominated by Peking University,” China’s oldest modern university. Indology was taught on Peking University’s campus as early as 1917. The ensuing decades were the high water marks for India’s cultural influence in China. Kang Youwei, a renowned reformer of the last years of the Qing Dynasty, finished a draft on how to build a utopian society during his exile in India. Poems of India’s Nobel literature laureate Rabindranath Tagore were translated and became a must read for young Chinese. Dozens of books about Mohandas Gandhi were published in Chinese. At the time, India was under British colonial rule, and China was considered a half-colony. The two ancient giants were humiliated and in urgent need of salvation. Suffering and searching bound the two countries together, and learning about India was almost a fad among Chinese elite and masses alike. Peking University was, quite simply, the center of scholarly information about India.

Before 1948, courses on Hindi, as well as two ancient Indian languages, Sanskrit and Pali, were opened one after another at

Peking University, followed by an Urdu major in 1954 and Bengali in 2004. In addition to teaching South Asian languages, Peking University opened an Indian research center in 2003 and a Pakistani research center in 2008.

Other Indian studies centers were not so lucky. In 1978, when China was still reeling from the havoc of the Cultural Revolution that sought to destroy the dignity of intellectuals, the Education Ministry reshuffled the limited resources devoted to higher education and research. Two centers were opened for South Asian studies—one for Indology in northeastern Jilin Province, which borders North Korea and Russia, and a second focusing on the Indian economy in a major university in the landlocked, southwestern Sichuan Province. Today, only the Sichuan center remains active, expanding as trade and investment between China and South Asia have increased.

Yu Longyu, a Hindi major at Peking University, opened an Indian Research Center at Shenzhen University in the coastal city on the forefront of China’s opening to the world. He lamented inadequate teaching of South Asian languages across the nation, and the limited number of talented students who were quickly lured away by Chinese companies eyeing business there.

As a result, Chinese diplomats in South Asian embassies and consulates rarely speak any languages besides Chinese and English. “The India foreign service has a program training young diplomats to become fluent Chinese speakers, and there are more than 20 of them,” says Yu. Moreover, the discussions about India in Chinese think tanks are mostly security related. “Most commentators are Asia experts, or international relations experts, who don’t focus on India at all. But India is so big, so complicated, and

so different, one can hardly get a sense even after spending decades on it. That's why many of these discussions don't make sense. They don't know what they are talking about," says Yu.

In contrast, there are more than 10 official or semi-official Indian think tanks with extensive China studies, and 17 Indian universities that not only teach Chinese, but also have faculties studying modern China. In 1990, the Institution of Chinese Studies was set up, drawing scholars from various universities and institutes in Delhi.

#### 14 BORDERS

Part of the problem is geography. Of the 14 countries China borders, only two have incomplete demarcations of the frontier—India and Bhutan. But these unfinished negotiations pose different challenges to the two sides. New Delhi is barely 300 miles from the border, but Beijing is 2,500 miles away. The national security concern is more immediate from the Indian side. These fears have a strong footing in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Relations between the two nations went sour after India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959 and supported the Tibetan uprising, with tension also arising from India's Forward Policy that placed outposts along disputed border areas.

This culminated in China launching two attacks simultaneously on October 20, 1962, at a time when the Indian army was ill prepared. Although China made advances into Indian territory, Beijing ended the war in November 20, 1962, and guards from both nations withdrew to positions 12 miles behind the line of actual control. Memory of the war is still vivid in both countries, and the hostility only began to ebb after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China in 1988.

India continues to see China as one of its major security concerns, whereas China today views India, one of the few countries it has overwhelmingly defeated, largely through the prism of Tibet. Notably, India worries about China as part a package of issues that includes their common border, neighboring Pakistan and Kashmir.

History aside, the asymmetric access to information also plays a role in shaping the elites' knowledge of each other's country. Proficiency in English is a key advantage

for India in terms of its development, allowing India's elites easy access to international mainstream media, which offers a fair amount of coverage on China. "But Chinese elites and scholars are not as skillful in using English to accumulate information, and once they do, they (will) use it to access knowledge of the west—the United States or Europe—not India," says Shenzhen University's Yu.

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**CHINA IS COMING TO REALIZE THAT A BIG POWER MAY ALSO BE A NEIGHBOR, AND INDIA'S IMPORTANCE IS ELEVATED WITH SUCH A SHIFT IN FOCUS.**

#### A NEW CHAPTER

When Singh posed with his Chinese counterpart, Li Keqiang, at the red-walled Forbidden City that has housed 24 Chinese emperors, he was standing at an interesting crossroads of China's relations with its neighbors.

The day Singh left Beijing, a two-day, neighboring-country diplomacy meeting was held with the participation of all seven Politburo Standing Committee members. Of course, China has many immediate neighbors besides India. Still, this

was the first time a foreign affairs working conference gathered the entire top echelon of Chinese leaders—their goal to focus considerable attention on diplomacy with neighboring countries and regions. China's recently named President Xi Jinping visited Russia in March, four Eurasian countries in September, and Indonesia and Malaysia in October. Premier Li Keqiang visited India and Pakistan in May and three Southeast Asia countries in October. Moreover, the prime ministers of three neighboring countries were invited to Beijing the same week. Clearly, the new leadership is readjusting diplomatic policy with neighbors, not merely by showing more goodwill, but by following up with concrete moves. Indeed, most visits were complemented by billion dollar trade contracts.

For decades, China's foreign diplomacy centered on major Western powers—the United States, Europe, and Russia. Mere lip service was paid to neighboring countries and regions. The Chinese government likes to frame its diplomatic strategy as “big countries are the key, neighboring countries are priorities, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateral relations are an important stage.” And for several years the first of these four goals received overwhelming attention. The recent Politburo meeting and the parade of visits to neighbors, coupled with President Obama's abrupt decision to skip the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Bali, which President Xi attended, highlighted this new focus. Suddenly, China is coming to realize that a big power may also be a neighbor, and India's importance is elevated with such a shift in focus.

At the same time, there has been increasingly vocal support for an expansion

of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, comprising of China, Russia, and four Central Asian countries, to include India and Pakistan, coupled with discussions over creation of a strategic triangle of China, India, and Russia.

To China, India is not simply one target in a renewed charm offensive on its neighbors, but also a vital part of BRICS that China sees as a new force capable of challenging existing international institutions dominated by Western powers. A significant sign of recognition came in 2009, when China elevated its ambassadors in India and Brazil to the ranks of deputy-ministers, the highest level in the Chinese diplomatic service. In the past, that standing had been reserved for seven countries, including the four other permanent members of United Nations Security Council together with North Korea, Japan, and Germany.

Following these government policies, Chinese business should also seize the opportunity to open the Indian market. Since the Indian government announced, in July, policies to lure foreign capital, the country has sped up privatization and opened such sectors as retail, aviation, and broadcasting to foreign investment. Of course, obstacles, including the lack of infrastructure, inefficient bureaucracy, and high inflation remain. Worse yet, letters of guarantee issued by Chinese banks are not officially accepted in India, making it hard for Chinese companies to raise money for Indian projects. But with China's rapidly rising labor, land, and other costs, the Indian market and demographic dividend can offset many negatives.

One important approach that shouldn't be overlooked is people to people ties. The two governments have designated 2014 as the Year of Friendship and



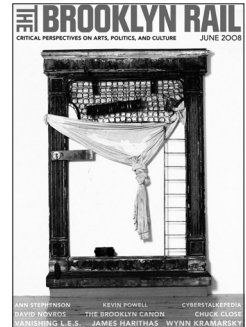
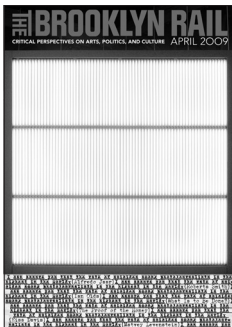
Exchange. But while this project carries some inherent importance, it should serve largely as a launching pad for a deeper relationship between the two nations in years to come. A comprehensive system of exchanges is vital—in education, science and technology research, sports, and culture. All are areas where joint activities can build mutual understanding. Only with such long-term initiatives can gains

be institutionalized and understanding spread beyond a limited policy circle in the two capitals.

There may be a long time before relations between China and India can be as close as those between China and Russia. But with increasing economic ties, and determination by China's new leadership to rewrite the entire tone of this vital relationship, significant improvement can be expected. ●

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