



Grasshopper and the ant

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Indians excel in sciences. Is not information technology one of the factors behind giving a terrific shine to India's image abroad? Unfortunately, the same probably cannot be said about Indians' mastery of geography and history, at least as far as the media is concerned.

Recently, the Chinese Government published a world map in its World Affairs Year Book: 2003-2004 in which, for the first time, Sikkim was no longer shown as a separate country. Further, Sikkim was not mentioned in the index of independent countries. While South Block took "note of the latest developments", this news provoked much jubilation in the editorial rooms.

A national Daily from the South immediately posted on its website: *"The move is significant since it involves recognition of the present Sikkim-China border which is part of the 'McMahon line' which Beijing has never accepted as constituting the boundary between India and China."*

Obviously, the journalist who wrote this piece had no idea where the McMahon line is in fact situated. It is a rather serious matter when Beijing still claims approximately 90,000 sq km of Indian territory south of the famous line which was demarcated on a map by the plenipotentiaries of British India (Sir Henry McMahon) and Tibet (Lochen Shatra) in March 1914. Not many seem to realise that the line stretches from the tri-junction Bhutan-Tibet-India to the tri-junction Burma-Tibet-India, far away from the Tibet-Sikkim border.

I have personally heard a similar statement on NDTV and friends told me that even All India Radio broadcasted the same geographical nonsense.

The Chinese must rub their hands in delight in face of this Indian confusion. While Beijing has generously just admitted something which it had already officially recognised way back in March 1890 through "The Convention between Great Britain and China relating to

Sikkim and Tibet", Indian scribes jumped about as if it was a great victory for India. In the process, they forgot to point out that China continues to claim Arunachal Pradesh.

The next day, the Sikkim Government gave the credit to its Chief Minister for "achieving this major breakthrough" and in the same breath declared: *"The journey to Manasarovar, one of the holiest Hindu rivers in Chinese occupied Tibet, which was undertaken by pilgrims through Uttaranchal, will be the shortest through Sikkim once Nathula was opened."* How a couple of hundred kilometres longer route can become shorter after the Chinese admission is a challenging question to answer!

This poor knowledge of geography (and history) is not new. During a press conference in January 1952, a journalist asked Prime Minister Nehru about some undefined borders in the north-west sector. Nehru answered: "I do not know. The McMahon Line is a definition of that border on the north-east." The journalist insisted: *"There is a certain tract which is undefined so far - even on the maps it is shown as undefined - towards the north-east and north-west, between Nepal and the province of Kashmir: Near Lake Manasarovar."*

Nehru answered that he was not aware of it. The interviewer persisted: *"But even on the maps it is shown as an undefined border."* Nehru could only reply: *"Maybe. All these are high mountains. Nobody lives there. It is not very necessary to define these things."*

The scribe was referring to the Indo-Tibetan border in Ladakh which had been defined during the 10th century when King Nyimagon divided his land between his three sons. During the following centuries, it had become the customary border and in 1684, it was reiterated by the Peace Treaty between Ladakh and Tibet: "The boundaries fixed, in the beginning, when king Nyimagon gave a kingdom to each of his three 'sons, shall still be maintained," said the Agreement.

In 1842, the representatives of Shri Maharajah Sahib (Gulab Singh) and the Lama Guru of Lhasa (the Dalai Lama) confirmed again that they "recognise ancient boundaries". But instead of demarcating the border on the ground or printing maps showing her frontiers, India began to sing the "Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai" tune.

It reminds me of a fable that I learned in school as a young French student. Written by Jean de la Fontaine in the 17th century, it is the story of the Grasshopper and the Ant:

The Grasshopper having sung

All the summer long,

Found herself lacking food

When the North Wind began its song.

When the East Wind blew over the Middle Kingdom, Nehru and his colleagues began to sing of the eternal brotherhood. But the provident Chinese Ant was garnering for the future. It printed maps showing large chunks of Asia as part of the Chinese empire. It cost the new Communist Government little (hardly any printing cost) to engulf NEFA (today Arunachal Pradesh), Sikkim, Ladakh, and other territories of Asia in their maps.

Nehru complained several times to Zhou Enlai, but the Machiavellian Chinese Premier was unconcerned. To gain time, he just said that they were old maps and that the new regime had not found the time to reprint new ones.

However, years passed and the maps remained. While the industrious Ant was preparing for the showdown in NEFA and Ladakh, the Grasshopper (with the illustrious Defence Minister Krishna Menon as its lead singer) continued to vocalise on great Principles. In October 1962, Winter days fell upon India. But Beijing could not be faulted for Delhi not having done its home work. As in the story, the Grasshopper should have been asked: "What did you do all summer?"

The fable depicts two strong human tendencies, the Ant planning its action years in advance and working hard to garner for the future and the Grasshopper which speaks and sings noisily but does not think of tomorrow.

The Grasshopper reminds me of Nehru's India. In the tale, the Grasshopper justified:

Night and day I sang,

Whether you like it or not.

But the morale of the story was provided by the Ant:

You sang? Wonderful

But now my neighbour,

it is time to dance.

The UPA Government led by the Congress will soon resume border talks with China. Let us hope that South Block has learnt the Ant's lessons and will make sure that their loft is full before singing too loud. In any case, the geographical knowledge of the Indian media needs improvement.