



Unnatural lakes, natural alarm

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Less than two months ago, there was euphoria in the corridors of South Block. India was "celebrating" 50 years of the Panchsheel Agreement. The media jubilated, largely on these lines: "It is not often that you find a former President, five Cabinet Ministers, a Chief Minister, a Lieutenant Governor and over 20 Ambassadors/High Commissioners in one place. It happened at a function organised by the External Affairs Minister, Mr Natwar Singh, to release a 'special cover' to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Panchsheel." Today, it is surprising, to say the least, that last month's friends cannot even help each other in times of distress. The facts: An artificial lake at Pareechu in Tibet was created, according to the Chinese authorities, by seasonal landslides. Reports suggest that the water level in the lake has been increasing every day. Experts agree that if it bursts, there would be devastating effects in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh. According to the Survey of India Institute at Dehra Dun, the lake has 114 million cubic metres of water. It is 60 metres deep and has a total area of 230 hectares.

The depth was measured by the institute with data supplied by the National Remote Sensing Agency in Hyderabad which had sent the latest satellite images of the water body to the institute. A red alert was issued by the Himachal Government; armed and paramilitary forces were put on war footing with thousands of human and animal lives under threat. The Rs 8500 crore mega Nathpa Jhakri Project which employs more than 1000 people has been closed due to the alert.

However, the matter is even more serious for the security of India. This area is of utmost strategic importance along the India-China border. In August 2000, I visited Spiti valley to attend a Conference on Tibetan medicine. I was witness to the devastation caused by the bursting of another "natural lake created by landslides". In 2000, not a single bridge was intact. To reach Kaza, the headquarters of Spiti valley, we had to go the long way through Manali and Rohtang Pass. Along the way, we kept crossing Army vehicles transporting

portable bridges. Apart from the loss of human lives, the Border Road Organisation had to completely rebuild the road and bridges.

The Tribune in Chandigarh questioned the cause of the floods: *"Even three days after the disaster, the mystery of the flashfloods in the Sutlej, which wreaked havoc along its 200-km length in the State, remains unresolved."* It added: *"Experts are at a loss to understand where the huge mass of water came from."* Imagine a 50-ft high wall of water descending into the gorges of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh! In a few hours, more than 100 persons died, 120 km of a strategic highway (Chini sector) was washed away and 98 bridges destroyed.

A few months later, a detailed study was carried out by ISRO scientists. It confirmed that the release of excess water accumulated in the Sutlej basins in Tibet had led to the flash floods. Nearly a year later, the weekly India Today commented: *"While the satellite images remain classified, officials of the Ministry of Water Resource indicate that these pictures show the presence of huge water bodies or lakes upstream in Sutlej and Siang river basins before the flash floods took place. However, these lakes disappeared soon after the disaster struck Indian territory. This probably means that the Chinese had breached these water bodies as a result of which lakhs of cusecs of water were released into the Sutlej and Siang river basins."*

When I mentioned this to Indian "experts", I was told that "natural" landslides were occurring everywhere and there was no big deal about it. Four years later, the "natural" process has again occurred. Although this time the Chinese Government has informed the Government of India of the impending mishap, Beijing has remained silent on New Delhi's request to send a fact-finding team to Tibet. Delhi announced that "the visit of a four-member technical team-comprising a mining expert, two members from the Central Water Commission and an expert from the Nathpa hydel project-to the site has been put off."

The experts were supposed to have inspected the site and worked with their Chinese counterparts to blast some portions of the lake in order to release the pressure and control the release of water. When asked whether China has given its clearance for the trip to Tibet of the four experts, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan refused to answer. Where is the so-called friendship when such a huge area is facing an impending

catastrophe and hundreds of human lives and property worth thousands of crores of rupees is at stake?

The Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman could only say: "We are awaiting clearance from the Chinese side." This can only lend to suspicion that the "natural" lake might not in fact be so "natural", as ISRO had found out in 2000. At that time, the Chinese had purposely blasted the lake without informing the Indian authorities. But, of course, this was before the reiterating of the Great Principles.

One cannot help thinking that in 1960, when tension between India and Pakistan was high, the two nations found the wisdom and the courage to sign the Indus Water Treaty. Some may say that it was not an ideal document, but at least it had the merit of existing. What is the problem before India and China to sign a similar comprehensive treaty today? Today Beijing swears by a new friendship with India. The China Daily wrote on August 10 an editorial, 'Sino-Indian ties warming up'. Though it states: *"Of course, behind India's initiative of conciliation is its assertive national aspirations,"* it also acknowledges that *"India has put forward a multi-faceted diplomacy, of which repairing relations with China is an important part."* The Chinese paper added: *"In the past, India has considered China as its potential threat and main strategic rival."* As the gap between China and India in comprehensive national strength widens, India has come to realise that it was a smart move to conciliate with rather than alienate China.

India does not want to alienate China, but Beijing should also conciliate Delhi at least on the issue of the Himalayan river, if not on the border question. The only thing which is lacking is goodwill. One can recall the floods two years ago in the southern province of Hunan in China. A swollen Dongting Lake threatened to engulf millions of people. At that time the Chinese authorities evacuated 600,000 people in immediate danger.

Xinhua declared *"more than a million people were piling sandbags and checking for breaches in hundreds of miles of embankments around Dongting that protect 10 million people living in a region of flat, fertile farmland."* Why can't the same thing be done in Tibet? I am sure the Government of India would be ready to send man-power and engineers to help. The Sutlej, like the Indus or the Brahmaputra does not belong to China alone-there are hundreds of millions of stake-holders in South Asia who also have (through their respective governments) their word to say.

One of the problems is the Indian officials do not dare to speak for fear of "jeopardising" the warming up or the border talks. Nothing will happen to the border for the next few years, but today the lives of thousands are in danger. The MEA owes it to the nation to take up with the Chinese officials, the genuine concern of the people of India for the Himalayan rivers.