



An 'outsider' in India

Gautam Siddharth

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Claude Arpi, French author and journalist living in India for the past 33 years, is a well-known name on the editorial pages of The Pioneer - and the reasons are not far to seek. He writes with a vision and a deep sense of history. His articles reveal the rigours of research and a clarity of perception not ordinarily discernible in the writings on the same subjects by most Indian commentators and journalists.

Claude's sensibilities are more 'Indian' than those of most Indians, and that's what marks him out. His drive and tenacity in holding forth on issues that confront India both as a nation and civilisation -especially in relation to its neighbourhood -leaves lasting impressions. In the process, he homes in on certain truths that are informative as well as edifying.

Claude is one of the few ardent believers in the need of free Tibet. It has, of course, made him enormously unpopular with the Chinese, and to many his position may seem impractical or unreal. But he took pains to dispel such notions when he told a small but distinguished gathering at IIC on Friday at the release of his book, a compendium of his journalistic writings (*India and Her Neighbourhood*; Har- Anand; Rs 495), that he does not 'dislike' China; but neither would he stop believing that Tibet cannot once again become a 'buffer' between India and China.

On the contrary, he thinks China as one of the most important

geopolitical powers which can help shape human destiny in a variety of more creative and constructive ways than it has done so far, and that much of it can be done through its leadership's rearranging its attitudinal prism on Tibet. Claude's proposition is a very reasonable.

Great powers gain more respect if they recognise their mistakes and apologise for those mistakes. Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi apologised to China, saying, "In the past Japan, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering for the people of many countries, particularly those of Asian nations." He said this at a summit of more than 100 Asian and African nations in April this year. "Japan," he added, "squarely faces these facts of history in a spirit of humility." Though Chinese President Hu Jintao was present when Mr Koizumi spoke, he did not react to the apology. But Mr Hu could nonetheless take a leaf out of Mr Koizumi's book and apologise to Tibet for the way its people, culture and religion have been trampled upon by the Chinese.

The curious thing, of course, is that such a process may actually have started, far away from the stern and unmoving gaze of the Chinese Communist Party in distant Beijing. As Claude said -quoting one of the greatest French thinkers of the 20th century Andre Malraux, "The 21st century will be a spiritual century, or it will not be" the Chinese have not been able to change Tibet or Tibetans in spite of their forcible occupation of that country for more than 50 years; rather, the Tibetans with their spiritual stability, are now making the Chinese take a fresh look at their own dormant orientation. Many Chinese youth have started visiting monasteries inside Tibet and have in fact reverted to Buddhism. Some of those who burn incense sticks in temples in Tibet include the bosses of the Communist Party!

To what extent, and how, can India play a role in changing China?

Claude believes this can happen only if India pulls itself up to its full height every time it engages China. For instance (in a private conversation), Claude was bemused when Chinese Consul General Song De Heng reacted sharply to Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee's observation in Mumbai recently, that "China has solved its border disputes with all its neighbours except India and Bhutan." Mr Heng sprang to his feet and promptly took off: "I fail to understand what you mean by saying that China has resolved its border disputes with all its neighbours barring India and Bhutan. Both the nations have been discussing. Is China difficult or India?"

Said Claude, "In any other country, the Consul General would have been issued a demarche or a memorandum for such glaring breach of protocol. A Consul General is not supposed to respond to the Defence Minister of a country in that manner. But we saw how, instead, there were discussions in New Delhi's drawing rooms on whether Mr Pranab Mukherjee was right or wrong in 'raking' up the issue. Would the Chinese have tolerated an Indian Consul General ticking off their Defence Minister during a public function in, say, Shanghai?"

Would, indeed, an Indian Consul General have dared, in the first place, to take on China's Defence Minister? The Chinese, a rambunctious people whenever they perceive a slight, move heaven and earth to prove their point even when they may be aware that they could be wrong. But in India we seem to specialise in self-flagellation. Such tendencies are not what make a nation great, but such is what we reveal of ourselves everytime it comes to standing up and being counted.

A character trait of Tibetan leaders palpable during their moment of crisis was to clamp up. Even after the PLA had reached Lhasa, the rulers of Tibet chose to keep quiet for days fearing that if they spoke,

things could get worse. The Chinese must have loved such opposition. Being peace-loving need not translate into such abject surrender before violence.

Certainly India is no Tibet, but then it also does not appear as forceful and assertive as China on the international stage. As an Asian rival China is today streets ahead of India whereas in 1949 it was worse off than us in every possible sphere. This is not to suggest that India needs to define itself in comparison or relation to another country in its neighbourhood - far from it. But the Indian leadership does need to realise that a great power is as a great power does.