

Do we know who are our foes?

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Books about strategic studies published in India are often boring. One reason is that most of them turn out to be an apology for Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy: The so-called Non-Aligned Movement or the Five Great Principles of peaceful co-existence. It is difficult to understand what Indian experts find so great in these 'principles' which led to the enslavement of Tibet, independent for 2,000 years and a peaceful neighbour.

It was, therefore, refreshing to read *Rising India, Friends and Foes: Essays in Honour of Prof ML Sondhi*. Edited by Prakash Nanda, a former National Fellow of the Indian Council of Historical Research, the essays are different from the usual stuff on foreign policy. Not only do they delve deeper into all aspects of the Asian situation, but also provide answers to some worrisome recent developments.

One of the problems of Nehru's diplomacy was the high opinion it had of itself; diplomats were extremely conceited about their so-called principled policies. I once came across two versions of the same event, the Indian version in the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* and the other in the French archives. I was amazed. In July 1954, the Geneva Conference on Indochina had just ended with Pierre Mendes-France, the French Premier, agreeing to withdraw from the peninsula. Nehru was convinced that his friend Krishna Menon had been the main instrument to force a change in French policy. He wrote to Menon: "My

affectionate congratulations to you on achievement at Geneva which undoubtedly has been greatly helped by your unceasing, unobtrusive and very effective work."

A few days later, Mendes-France informed the French Ambassador in Great Britain that he did not want to see Menon who had only "unofficially" participated in the Conference. Mendes-France commented, "He displayed an intense activity; however utterly useless in practice." He cautioned his Ambassador to "tread with care" because "it is better to avoid to irritate him; he possesses a great vanity and he systematically tries to project himself in a flattering light and give himself a role that nobody asked him to play". All the Western diplomats involved agreed on this point: They had had to bear with Menon's long monologues, as it was the best means to get information on the Communists' next move.

In many ways, the late Prof Sondhi was the opposite of Menon. Before writing or talking on a subject, he thought deeply about it and this without any preconception. This is why his views still remain relevant. MJ Akbar, in his foreword, describes Sondhi as "an intellectual marauder in orbits far above the ordinary mind". Why did the 'meteor' who "lighted up the crucial general election of 1967" disappear so soon? "Comets do not bother to answer", explains Akbar, but one of the reasons might be that "charm, sincerity, conviction and erudition are not the preferred virtues of Delhi".

Let us not forget that Sondhi was the first one to break the Congress's monopoly in Delhi when he was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1967 on a Jana Sangh ticket. In those days, he was as popular as Atal Bihari Vajpayee, but 10 years later, it was the latter who was rewarded with the coveted post of Foreign Minister during the Janata regime. Sondhi's problem was perhaps that his ideas were ahead of his time or

at least of what his contemporaries could perceive as the reality of the moment. He was probably punished for 'dissonance more than dissent'.

Usually, large chunks of a book like this are devoted to studies of Pakistan and its relations with India. But this volume endorses what Sondhi believed was central to India's foreign policy: The importance of China in the Asian framework. Due to the obsession with Pakistan, China has been neglected and when studied, it has been more from a "*bhai-bhai*" point of view.

Some recent news tends to show how much Sondhi was right. Last week, the BBC spoke of the UK's growing concern about the Taliban receiving arms and ammunitions from China: "The Taliban have recently begun boasting that they have now got hold of much more sophisticated weaponry ... Afghan officials have also privately confirmed to the BBC that sophisticated Chinese weapons are now in the hands of the Taliban. They said these included Chinese-made surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft guns, landmines, rocket-propelled grenades and components for roadside bombs ... these weapons have been made recently in Chinese factories."

Despite the much-publicised "peaceful rise of China" policy, it has been reported that some hackers working for China's military have attacked the computer networks of the German Chancellery and the Pentagon. According to experts, Beijing's objective was to get hold of secret information and confidential technology, apart from planting hidden viruses that could be activated later. This sounds like the "asymmetric warfare" described in *Unlimited Warfare* written by two PLA colonels. Moshe Yegar, a former Israeli Ambassador, has written about Sondhi's involvement in India establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Yegar discloses that when PV Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister, India

sought a \$2.5 billion loan from the IMF. Sondhi, who had struggled for years to get Israel recognised by India, thought it was the ideal opportunity to get the support of the Jewish lobby in the US.

The Government supported his idea and soon after Foreign Secretary JN Dixit announced the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel. Two weeks later, Rao visited the US and what Sondhi had predicted came true: India's improved image in the US facilitated the approval of the crucially required loan. The irony of this story is that the Chinese mentors of our pathologically anti-Israel Indian comrades had all along kept excellent relations with Israel.

Another of Sondhi's out-of-the-ordinary ideas was that "Chinese humanism today exists only in Taiwan and therefore India should develop strong relations with Taiwan". These are some glimpses of a book worth reading.

Several years ago, after the Dalai Lama had agreed to release my first book in Delhi, I was asked to organise a panel to discuss its contents. I immediately thought of Sondhi. He agreed to participate and like always, he had a novel idea: "If you wanted to organise an international conference on terrorism, narcotics, trade barriers, environmental issues or even Asian security, where could you organise it?" His suggestion was that a demilitarised Tibet would be "the most marvellous place to establish institutes, negotiating fora for conflict resolution which would help to ensure peace and harmony in the world".