

**I**ncursions by the Chinese Army into Indian territory are making headlines in the media again. This is good. Not because the Chinese persist with trespassing into Indian territory, but because media coverage brings to light such disturbing happenings. Instinctively, not to say genetically, India's political leadership prefers to hide the truth, to not "hurt our Chinese neighbours' feelings" or "makes things worse".

Keeping with India's diplomatic tradition, Foreign Minister SM Krishna said after recent incidents of Chinese incursion, "With China, I think the boundary has been one of the most peaceful. So, there is no issue on that." He added that there "is a built-in mechanism which is in place and which takes care of such incursions. India has so far acted with restraint, maintaining that the Line of Actual Control with China is not very well defined".

We could ask the question: Why is the LAC not well defined? What is the point of successive National Security Advisers meeting their Chinese counterparts (they have met on 15 occasions since 2003) if they are not even able to define an 'actual' line? Apart from the fact that it proves the insincerity of the Chinese who are not ready to take the first step to calm the tensions, the exercise seems a waste of public money.

This time, the Army has had the courage to acknowledge the facts. The Army chief, Gen Deepak Kapoor, has admitted that New Delhi lodged a protest with Beijing following the incursion by a Chinese helicopter into Indian territory and the painting of some rocks along the presumptive LAC in red.

According to reports in the media, "the army is gathering evidence from the spots where Chinese troops had painted the rocks red". What does 'gathering evidence' mean? Does it imply that the Army is not aware of what is happening on the LAC? If true, it is a serious and worrying lapse. This reluctance of India's politicians and officials to acknowledge the truth is not new. It is probably a genetic feature of the Indian Foreign Service.

In May, when I spent some time in Munshyari, the last town before the India-Tibet border in the Kumaon Hills, I located the 'historian' of the area. Till the 1962 War, this *tehsil* used to be the main centre for business with western Tibet. Most of the Bhotias, the local tribe, lived on trade. Caravans used to depart from Milam, a village in Johar Valley, north of Munshyari, and proceed to the trade markets around the Kailash-Mansarovar area.

The old 'historian' told me a story

# Flawed response to incursions



Claude Arpi



which flabbergasted me. A gentleman native to the area, called Lakshman Singh Jangpangi, had joined the Foreign Service in the 1940s as a senior accountant posted at the Indian Trade Mart of Gartok, east of Kailash. In 1946, he was promoted to the important post of British Trade Agent. When India became independent, he continued to serve in the same position till he was transferred to Yatung in 1959.

I was told that Jangpangi, who from Gartok had a panoramic view of what was going on in western Tibet, had informed his Minister (Jawaharlal Nehru) that the Chinese had started to build on the arid Aksai Chin plateau. That was in 1951-52. Crossing the Indian territory, the road only became the address for official correspondence with the Chinese Government seven years later. It was finally debated in Parliament in 1959. Probably, the Government did not want to 'hurt Chinese

sentiments'; or it believed that the issue would be solved with the passage of time.

The most ironic part of the story is that Jangpangi was awarded the first Padma Shri given to a Kumaoni 'for his meritorious services'. Was it for breaking the news or for having kept quiet? We will probably never know.

Today, if a courageous historian requests the Government to declassify the relevant file, he will be quoted Article 8 (1) (a) of the Right to Information Act: "There shall be no obligation to give any citizen, information, disclosure of which would prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the state."

Incursions by the Chinese continued in the 1950s in Garwal (Barahoti), Himachal Pradesh (Shipki-la) and then spread to Ladakh and NEFA. Mao's regime could have only felt encouraged

by the Government of India's feeble complaints. New Delhi was probably satisfied with its seasonal protests and the immediate denials by Beijing. Hundreds of such complaints have been recorded in the 14 Volumes of the White Papers published from 1959 to 1965 by the Ministry of External Affairs.

A telling incident is worth recalling. In September 1956, a group of 20 Chinese soldiers crossed over Shipki-la pass into Himachal Pradesh. A 27-member Border Security Force team met the Chinese the same day. The BSF team was told by a Chinese officer that he had been instructed to patrol right up to Hupsang Khad (four miles south of Shipki-la, the acknowledged border pass under the Panchsheel Agreement).

However, the BSF team was advised "to avoid an armed clash but not yield to the Chinese troops". New Delhi did not quite know how to react. A few days later, Nehru wrote to the Foreign Secretary, "I agree with (your) suggestion ... it would not be desirable for this question to be raised in the Lok Sabha at the present stage".

The policy of the Government of India was to remain silent on this issue and eventually mention it 'informally' to Chinese officials. Finally, the Ministry of External Affairs informed Beijing: "The Government of India is pained and surprised at this conduct of the Chinese commanding officer." That was 53 years ago. Is the situation any different today?

There is another irony. The Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir, Mr Omar Abdullah, has said that India has the right to respond: "It is our right to respond in case of ceasefire violations." Of course, he was speaking about Pakistan and the other corner of his State. He would not have dared to use these words with China.

It is rather depressing. I have an Indian friend, knowledgeable in defence matters, who always tells me that one should not worry, that genes can evolve, even Darwin had said so. Is it just a matter of one or two generations before Indians get to acquire Chinese genes? Let us see.