

PM Modi's hello to Xi reflects Indian ambivalence

TOI timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/cultural-inputs/pm-modis-hello-to-xi-reflects-indian-ambivalence

Jagdish Batra

November 19, 2022



Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been trolled for shaking hands with Xi Jinping at the G-20 summit in Bali, Indonesia. The telecast of the brief encounter showed Xi extending hand to which, Modi, coming from a distance reciprocated rather heartily. After this, Modi did talk for a few seconds while Xi nodded briefly before turning his head to the interpreter, and that was the end of the video clip. Coming as the video did alongside Modi's warm exchange of pleasantries with President Joe Biden and other world leaders, it seemed to present a stark contrast that sought to lower P.M. Modi's stature. The viewers had varied opinions though the opposition parties were unsparing in their attack on what they felt was unwelcome approach to Xi. They would have been more satisfied if Modi had done what he did at the SCO summit in Samarkand — maintaining distance, or if encountered, show a stern eye!

Modi's hello reminded some of the past dialogues he had with Xi, during the visits to each other's country by the two leaders. While one such visit by Modi in 2018 to Wuhan was successful in cooling tempers post-Doklam and resolving the issue, the entire exchange ended up with the Chinese aggression in Galwan. It was a repeat of the Zhou Enlai- Nehru exchanges before the 1962 Chinese aggression. The situation on the LAC is still tense with hectic activity on to build infrastructure in order to match the Chinese position, which has compelled India to spend huge funds on logistics, infrastructure and employment of a large number of troops there. Then, it is not merely the border issue with China that we have to deal with, it is also the continuous support by China in terms of money, means and motivation to the terrorists operating in the country, whether they don the Maoist cap or the Islamist colours. But for the support extended by China, Pakistan would not have dared to carry on its nefarious activities supporting separatist elements in our country, and the Indian response to Pakistan too would have been more direct, prompt and effective. All this surely makes any engagement with Xi a demeaning exercise.

But come to think of it: doesn't Modi's approach have a marked affinity with the dichotomy that ordinary people in India exhibit between their word and deed with respect to China. We may abuse China ad nauseam and support our army in its fight against the aggressor, but when it comes to doing something practical, we are found wanting. We forget that we can do a lot to take revenge on China through boycott of Chinese goods and

services. It is not a herculean task to stop purchasing consumer goods which are also produced within the country. Clearly, we tend to separate our activities in silos of business and patriotism. For an ordinary consumer, it is the money that is to be saved or a fancy to be satisfied even if it means starving domestic industry or artisans.

The industry and business in India often complain of this type of consumer mindset, and advance it as an excuse to buy cheap stuff from China themselves. Most of our small and medium scale industries have turned into label-fixing units for imported Chinese goods. Trade with China cannot be banned overnight, such is our dependence on Chinese goods and accessories, but why can't these industrialists or businessmen not withhold the temptation of importing cheap stuff from China instead of striving to compete with Chinese companies? For this, they need to innovate which might need sacrificing profits, and herein lies the catch. Our industry is as much responsible for facilitating the import of Chinese goods as is the general public that would like to see China squashed.

Business with China also harms India in another way. It being a two-way affair, the Chinese too come to India ostensibly for trading purpose, but we should not forget that every Chinese, be s/he a student, tourist or trader, is also a member of the Communist Party back home. And while they are here, the Chinese authorities do keep an eye on them and harvest whatever knowledge or information they gather from here. Their hobnobbing with pliable, money-minded and unpatriotic elements here leads quite often to anti-national activities. We saw recently the case in which Indians were helping the Chinese with Indian citizens' data and then co-working to blackmail them. In the process, hundreds of crores were siphoned off to China before the law caught up with them. This is just the tip of the iceberg. For such elements, after a bloodbath at Galwan, it becomes business as usual!

So, if P.M. Modi clasps Xi's hand extended to him, it may not have been to simply reciprocate the courtesy in the true Indian tradition or to congratulate him for his "re-election" as the Chinese president, or to invite him to the next G-20 summit due to be held in India next year, the handshake could also be a gesture to keep the business lines open for the sake of Indian industries and businesses which are still very much hooked to China. With this kind of dependence on China, Modi is, then, not much off the track. After all, a leader derives his sustenance and power from the masses. In this case, he is only reflecting the mindset of us, Indians.

END OF ARTICLE