



Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi

Special Report

on

Impressions from My First Visit to China

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About more than two centuries ago, the French statesman Napoleon Bonaparte is believed to have stated that 'China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will move the world.' In 2014, President Xi Jinping, while participating in the commemoration ceremony of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations with France, stated that "Today, the lion (China) has woken up. But it is peaceful, pleasant and civilised." People may have reservations about the lion being peaceful, pleasant and civilised, however, everyone will agree over the fact that China has arrived at the international stage in a big way. There is hardly any important capital in the world where China's rise is not discussed.

Recently, I had an opportunity to visit Yunnan province of China for a conference. Besides interacting with the scholars and students, including Indians, I was able to get a glimpse of Chinese society, culture, tourist attractions, and most importantly the infrastructural progress and development. There were many surprises waiting for me. During my couple of visits to Visa Application Centre in New Delhi, I realised that contrary to general understanding far more Indians were planning their visits to China for one or the other reason. There were more than two dozen counters to process visa applications.

While on board in Shandong Airlines flight from Delhi to Kunming, I noticed that a member of the crew walked several times from the front to the back of the aircraft with a small device having camera in it. He was recording the activities of the passengers, possibly for security reasons. At least one third of the passengers were Indian, mostly businessmen. I had a word with a young Indian student who was going to Jinan for her medical education. In response to my question about Chinese educational institutions' quality, she simply replied that she opted for Chinese degree as she failed to secure a seat in Indian institutions.

The BRI Counter at the Airport

At the Kunming Airport, I was somewhat surprised to see a separate immigration counter for Belt and Road Countries. Since I knew India was not part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), I stood in a queue that read “Foreigners,” while holding my Indian passport in hand. As of now, I had no idea that soon I will be forced to join BRI! Seeing me with an Indian passport, one of the airport security staff asked me to be in the next queue meant for the BRI countries. I had no other option, but to follow the instructions. In next 10 minutes, I came outside the airport where my hosts were waiting for me. The discussion with the hosts during our drive to the hotel made me much more comfortable. I was also impressed by the welcome gesture at the airport itself, as one of the hosts came up with a bouquet dressed in Indian attire—short cotton *Kurta*—similar to one I had put on.

The Kunming City

Yunnan province is located in the south-western part of China that is considered to be less developed than the eastern part of the country, especially in terms of infrastructure and connectivity. The capital city Kunming, due to its pleasant weather, is also known as “city of spring” or “the city of eternal spring.” It is not Beijing or Shanghai and, in that way, should never be compared with Delhi or Mumbai. However, I got somewhat disappointed while thinking about Delhi in Kunming. In terms of planned development, basic infrastructure, greenery, cleanliness, and air quality, Delhi is far behind Kunming. Seeing the number of high-

rise buildings and other facilities, one thinks as if India is about five decades behind China.

One generally does not see traffic police on the road as everything is electronically monitored and people follow traffic rules. Besides CCTV cameras, they have installed high definition, high-resolution and Artificial Intelligence Powered cameras that click pictures of moving vehicles. Such a high technology empowers them to monitor almost every movement of people on the road. The roads within the city were quite clean. Mostly, people were using electric bikes. Unlike in Delhi, these bikes were fitted with powerful engines that had better pick up and speed on the road.



Park 1903, Xishan.

The Conference

The conference was held in a hotel in the heart of Kunming. Most of the Chinese scholars and participants turned out to be patient listeners. It was really good to see three Indian students in the audience. Given my presentation on India-Pakistan Relations, I expected some tough questions. However, not a single controversial and

uncomfortable question was raised during the conference. Generally, they asked about historical reasons for partition of the subcontinent, factors most responsible for the creation of Pakistan, India's changing approach in dealing with Pakistan etc. Privately, some of them asked about Indian reservations over CPEC and India's approach to tackling terrorism and extremism in the region. Almost everyone in China seemed to have obsessed with BRI. It is seen by everyone as a unique and great initiative taken by top Chinese leader Xi Jinping. People do not talk about any other leader but Xi Jinping. He is considered to be a great leader who will continue ruling till his death.



Conference Hall, Kunming

The Local Business Model at Tourist Places

We visited Jiuxiang Scenic Area in Yiliang—some 90 km from the Kunming main city. While travelling from Kunming to Yiliang, I could see the high mountain ranges on both sides of the road. The scenic area combined hundreds of unique Karst caves, gorges, ethnic customs and cultural landscape. Although, the area has natural scenic beauty, it was developed in a way that visitors could easily go up and down to see every part of it without compromising their security. Cleanliness of the

place was something which one cannot ignore. Not a single piece of trash was visible anywhere inside the tourist spot.

There are few picturesque spots inside the cave complex where ones can get his/her pictures clicked. Professional photographers were requesting visitors to get their pictures clicked for free. They were saying “No money, no money.” This freebee attracted many. I also got my pictures clicked. While I was getting out of that particular cave, I was handed over two key-rings with my tiny photographs framed in it. There, I learned that I could get a bigger picture by paying 40 Yuan (nearly INR 400). Since the pictures were so beautiful, I decided to pay for the bigger picture. This was my first experience with Chinese local business model. I encountered the same while using ropeway to get out of the area and ended up paying another 40 Yuan for another beautiful picture. This time I was not asked to get my picture clicked, but they clicked it without any prior permission while I was sitting in ropeway and enjoying scenic beauty around.



The Cave Complex, Jiuxiang Scenic Area

Our next tourist destination was Dali—an ancient town. One of the hosts who accompanied us to Dali via road was good conversationalist. During the

discussions with him, I could get to know many good and not so good things about Chinese society. The road that we took for Dali was the same road which China wants to extend to Myanmar, Bangladesh and India making it a BCIM corridor. The guy kept asking me why India is not joining BRI and why it changed its mind over BCIM. There were 3-4 Km long tunnels that were made by cutting/drilling large mountains. Inside the long well-lit up tunnels, one could see big fans blowing fresh air into it.



The Dali Gate

At several places we saw mountains being drilled and cut to make new roads. At some places, mountains were flattened for agricultural purposes. In our way, we also saw the commercial agricultural farms. Generally, big companies either buy or acquire agricultural land for farming purposes. The company provides everything (seeds, water, pesticides) and instructs the farmer/labourer how to go about it. As we proceeded close to Dali, we could see the entire mountain deeply populated with large windmills. I was told that every windmill blade was 20 metres long. I also

encountered, at some places, street lights with solar panel and small windmill fitted into that giving the impression that Chinese were exploiting renewable natural resources at the optimum level.



The Erhai Lake, Dali, Yunnan.

Tourist places and markets in Dali were flooded with people. However, what surprised us was the low-level of noise. Despite large number of people in the streets, it was not noisy at all. In the streets, one can find young women selling small items at late night with no sense of fear or insecurity visible on their faces. I learned that in 2015, President Xi Jinping visited Dali and told the people that “Clean water and green mountains are silver and gold, so preserve them.” These were not mere words of the top leader. One could actually see the green mountains and clean water while visiting Erhai lake in Dali. At one place near Erhai lake, a sign board read “We have to protect Mother Erhai lake just like our eyes.” This is similar to people in India terming rivers as mother. Fishing is not allowed in the lake on a daily basis.

Once in a year the government gives permission to big companies to do fishing and that too for a limited period of time.

The People and System

Chinese are particular about their time. Everywhere, we could witness a mechanical punctuality. In India, we are familiar with the popular phrases such as “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” Chinese follow this in their day-to-day life. I could also notice that people in general were either shy or unwilling to talk to foreign tourists. Our attempts at several places did not bear fruit. Even young school boys and girls were hesitant to talk to a foreigner. Not being fluent in English language might be one reason behind such behaviour. During the discussion with our hosts, we got to know that most of the Chinese universities do not offer courses beyond graduation. Education is costly there. In a year, an undergraduate student pays at least 20,000 Yuan (INR 200,000) to the university. Only few meritorious students get scholarships. Most of the students after finishing their graduation join the workforce. This is possibly the reason China has been able to manufacture goods and provide services at quite a competitive price.

When we were returning from Jiuxiang cave complex, we lost our way and reached in a local market. Suddenly, we realised that the charm of the city and tourist destinations was fading away and we were witnessing the rougher suburban patches and village life. A few farmers were seen working in the field, others were transporting vegetables in small horse/donkey-carts. Old cars were lined up for selling, but there were no customers to buy those. The same appeared to be the case with few other shops. It gave us a feeling of a stagnating business environment. Outside the Kunming city, we could also witness the scarcity of water. At a road-side restaurant, where we stopped to have some food and refreshments, we found out dirty and old-fashioned toilets with no availability of water.

Hospitality and Food

Before visiting China, I had the impression that Pakistanis are the best hosts for Indians. Now, I can add that Chinese are not far behind. However, the treatment in

the streets and local markets by ordinary citizens and shopkeepers cannot be compared in the two countries. In Pakistan, one does not feel being an outsider, whereas in China one realise that every single moment. Being strictly vegetarian, I faced certain issues while choosing what to eat and what not to eat. The cooking style and spices used, made all the difference in taste. We could notice multiple varieties of mushrooms at several eateries. At a Vegan restaurant in Kunming, we could get Indian spices and Indian dishes too, yet the Indian taste was missing.



The Local Restaurant in Dali

The Minorities

It appeared to us that minority ethnic groups face certain issues. Whenever they were referred in the usual interactions, it seemed as if they (Chinese) were being less respectful to them (minorities). The terms like E-people, Wa-people, Bi-people were used to describe them. While travelling by road, we could see small temple like structures spread over the parts of mountain ranges. These turned out to be graves. During the conversation, we got to know that people can no longer bury their dead.

They can only cremate them. This particular policy is aimed to save more and more land/mountains from local encroachment.

Conclusion

The rise of China as a global power is not fictional, but real. There is a lot one can learn from Chinese experience and expertise. The optimum utilisation of natural resources, maintenance and preservation of cultural heritage, developing natural sites as tourist destination and keeping those clean are some of the remarkable achievements of China. However, that does not mean there are no problems and issues in China. The infrastructure boom, it seems, has almost reached its zenith. There is not much one can do about it. There appears to be some sort of stagnation in the country which is forcing it to move beyond the territorial limits. The Belt and Road Initiative is the natural outcome or reflection of this reality. This is the reason, everyone in China has an interest in the successful implementation of BRI.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.