
Yukti Panwar¹

“It has been called many names, but is best known as the Tiananmen Square incident because Tiananmen Square was the stage on which the drama that held the world spellbound for fifty days was performed. The happenings in the square led to the sort of chaos and uncertainty that usually presages a regime change. That did not happen.” (Gokhale, 2021)

In this book, former Foreign Secretary of India, Ambassador Vijay Gokhale goes down the memory lane to give his eye-witness account of one of the most prominent incidents of Chinese modern history – the Tiananmen Square incident. While giving his own account, he first dives into the background of prominent players of as he calls the players – Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Chen Yun and the other Elders in the leadership of China’s Communist Party (CCP). And then he traces all the political developments and undercurrents that happened and led to that final incident in 1989 – to do this, he goes back to the way Deng assumed power and supreme leadership in China. One major undercurrent throughout the book was the way he was juxtaposing the narratives brought out by the Western media and the Chinese media – and how both were different from the ground reality. The former was busy projecting the probable fall of Communism in China and the advent of democracy while the other was showing it as a form of discord propagated by very few in the minority. Student leaders’ accounts were not the most credible either, as the author highlights that they were also exaggerated in instances just to grab the media’s attention.

The author, while tracing the development of the stage for the Tiananmen Square incident also mentioned that the major countries dealing with China-Japan, the US, the UK, India, and Singapore, and their leadership had missed the possible eruption of chaos in the Chinese domestic political sphere, as China of the 1980s had offered all these countries a highly fertile ground to pursue their economic interests and further expand and develop their respective countries, facilitating its economic growth. According to the author, rather than the movement to bring about democracy in China,

¹ Yukti Panwar is a student of MA in Diplomacy, Law and Business, and is Centre Coordinator at the Centre for Security Studies, JSIA. Her interest areas lie in geopolitics, diplomacy, Indo-Pacific region, East Asia, cultural diplomacy and many others.
student protests, which were a major component of this incident, the idea of a little bit more transparency in the political discourse, and the demand for better economic conditions were major driving forces. The author very interestingly says that throughout Chinese history, the leadership has always feared the intellectuals more than those who bear weapons and the Tiananmen Square incident is a good example of that.

The whole book and its complex material are written in such a lucrative and easy-flowing language that it makes it easier to follow the complex and multi-dimensional trajectory of the making of this protest. At points, it felt like, that the reader herself is that young diplomat who witnessed and analysed this all and has written a book about it 30 years later. It is a good head start for an Indian especially, to gain a better understanding of China, its politics and its history, it can be read by anyone as long as they are interested to know about China. This account also seems much more unbiased and credible than both the projections made by the Chinese government and the western media.

This book is a definite read. It seamlessly manages to transport one to China of the 1980s and feel the scenario developed while feeding you with tides of knowledge – which never fail to leave us alone. Ultimately, the author has successfully tried to emphasise in his book, that the Tiananmen Square incident is an incident which is extremely crucial to understanding why Chinese state structures and the Communist Party function the way they do in our times. And why there are consistent efforts to make the common Chinese forget about this incident. Also, we should realise that this incident is still something that the Chinese leadership derives its lessons from. To evoke similar thoughts, I’ll conclude this review by quoting Fang Lizhi, one of the three scholars targeted severely by the CCP at the dawn of the Tiananmen Square incident, and also the one who became the cause of a sour point in US-China relations at the time. The same quote by Lizhi has been used by the author before starting the book:

“The leaders are aware that what happened is an extremely ugly mark on their historical record, and they have been eager to have the world forget it as soon as possible.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY