

## The Border Question

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The book under review is a welcome and timely reprint of a serious research completed in 1964. It has been penned by a senior scholar in international affairs and a widely acknowledged specialist in India-China relations. He was an Adviser to the Indian delegation which discussed the border question with the Chinese officials at a time when the armed conflict on the border was imminent. The authenticity of the present work largely emanates from the thorough knowledge the author commands over a whole range of source materials—maps, documents, chronicles, historical records, travelogues, treaties and agreements, military reports and what not.

The basic position Professor Rao takes is to treat the India-China border in appropriate historico-geographical and ethnological context; for he feels, and justifiably so, that to treat the border issue in isolation ran the risk of favouring some pre-conceived political solutions, irrespective of the complexities of the ground reality. Professor Rao also shows his sensitivity against advocacy of any partisan solution, such as one would find in the highly publicized work on the same subject by Alastair Lamb, which came out in the same year as the present work. Lamb and scholars who take his work at face value seem 'to view history through Chinese spectacles'—if not intentionally, at least due to the limited range of materials they relied on.

Admittedly, no study of the India-China border can proceed without reference to local administration records and on site evidences. After all, the boundary question is inextricably linked with the Chinese attempt, especially during the British rule, to make sporadic inroads into Tibet—held territories on the north east and the tribal territories in the Western Sector of the boundary. Objective evidence as available to-date refutes the oft-repeated Chinese claims on certain segments where traditional tribal presence on the Indian side has been proved beyond the slightest doubt.

Professor Rao contends that in mountainous regions national boundaries tend to follow the 'watershed line' and movement of human groups who find livelihood around such line, historically determines the natural limits of a territorial community. This would traditionally create natural boundaries and lend credence to jurisdictional claims of any administering authority. Thus, the daunting heights of the Karakoram despite its breaches here and there, place the northern part of Ladakh in an area known as 'Hunza' which acts as a real barrier to people on the other side. By the same token the 'eastern boundary of Ladakh offers an example of traditional boundary modified by political changes', but 'the entire Indus and Sutlez basins gave the kingdom a perfect watershed boundary with Tibet.' (p. 7). Rao acknowledges the presence

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\* *The India-China Border: A Reappraisal.* By Gondker Narayana Rao. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi. 2009. Rs 750.

of 'overlapping cultural and religious influences in a few areas'—as highlighted by Lamb but does not consider them to have compromised the traditional limits of sovereignty between India and Tibet, despite occasional invasions and migrations.

A potent source of the disputes pertaining to the border is the kind of evidence used and brandished in official negotiations. While the Chinese side had adroitly brought forward survey reports and maps of which earlier traces are difficult to establish, there were extensive survey reports prepared by and circulated within Indian defence establishment as well during the British rule. But they were dismissed by the Chinese as less than authentic as they were kept in secrecy. Professor Rao strongly contests such specious arguments. He also has recourse to a number of important treaty—documents such as the treaty of 1842 concluded after a spell of border skirmishes in the Ladakh-Tibet areas, which clearly 'fixed' the border between the two territories. As such, 'after about a century—and—half of observance of the treaty provisions, the case simply did not arise to 'ask for a fresh delimitation' brushing aside the customary boundary as the Chinese side insists.' (p. 18)

Similarly, regarding the Aksai-Chin boundary, it is worth noting that the claims of Chinese suzerainty run counter to the practice of the former Chinese rulers to see their Southern boundary *within and not beyond* the 'Kuen Len' mountains. This was authenticated by the conversations recorded by Nei Elias as late as 1879-80. Younghusband, famous for his expeditions in this area also 'collected evidence to similar effects' (p. 42). It is possible that due to what historians term British empire's 'Russophobia', the British Indian Government disregarded occasional Chinese intrusions so as to keep a third party engaged in thwarting Russian advances. But that sort of

round-about diplomacy would in no way weaken the Indian case to stick to the traditionally held boundaries as respected hitherto by all concerned.

Last but not the least, the events leading to the tri-partite conference in Simla (1913-14) and the framing of the MacMahon Line have been recounted by the author with great care and clarity. The background was anything but edifying for the 'mighty' British rulers who had conceded more than the Chinese ever expected. The extent of concessions being contemplated was to be found in the so-called Macdonald proposal. Things came to such a pass that Lord Curzon found it impossible to re-assert the local rights on the Raskam Valley 'without using force' and hence wanted freshly negotiated border settlement. This time the new Foreign Secretary MacMahon took the initiative to suggest a boundary on the basis of de facto occupation. Notably, in a memorandum of 17 August 1912 the British Government is found announcing its opposition to 'any further attempts by the Chinese government to change the political status of Tibet from what had been stipulated in the treaties of 1904 and 1906' (p. 84). This memorandum was accepted willy and nilly by the Chinese side and the final reconciliation was recorded in the proceedings of the Simla Conference. Alongside that, an Indo-Tibetan agreement was also signed by the representative from Lhasa and the British side by MacMahon. The Chinese, to-date, dispute the validity of this agreement on the untenable ground that China was not a party to it. Such a stand is absurd because, as Professor Rao cogently points out, 'in the circumstances in which the Simla conference was held, Chinese approval or adherence to an agreement entered into between India (ie under British rule) and Tibet was entirely redundant. At no time before 1951 had Tibet relinquished her right to have independent dealings with other

powers, or of entering into treaty relations with them.' Furthermore, the agreement arising from India-Tibet negotiation was anything but secret. It was published in Aitchison's volumes and way back in 1929 and there was no objection from the Chinese side at that time.

Finally, the current controversy over the Tawang area has been minutely examined by the author. Attention of Assam government was drawn to Reports of increasing Tibetan activity in the 1930s along upper Dihong and Tawang—two small settlements where services of Dzungpons (Tibetan priests) used to be hired by a Buddhist monastery. Encouraged by Lhasa, these Tibetan priests started playing upper hand in the monastic affairs. However, the then Government of India did

not pursue the matter energetically until after the end of World War II. The area came under a designated Political Officer in 1951 and by the time Chinese occupation of Tibet was complete, independent India started consolidating its hold over the area.

On the whole, therefore, the book provides one with enough facts and arguments that would cure any amount of doubt or diffidence that may vitiate Indian position concerning the border dispute. Shadowy claims with cartographical back-up need not be taken as overpowering elements in border negotiation. The book includes in the Appendix copy of a correspondence showing the then Russian government's concurrence of the 1914 convention which consecrated India-Tibet borders. ■

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