

THE DIVIDED COMMUNITIES ON THE EASTERN HIMALAYAN FRONTIER

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Introduction

This paper proposes to make a plea for understanding the pathetic condition of the divided communities along the international boundary in the Eastern Himalayas and for evolving a strategy for the frontier's management. It endeavours to clarify the term 'frontier' and its various facets. Then the paper proceeds to briefly portray how the British colonial rulers evolved their policy for the Himalayas. It is well-known that the British Indian frontier policy was shaped in the second half of the last century as a strategy to contain the tribesmen on the North-West frontier. By and large, we find them applying the same strategy in the eastern sector. Needless to mention, our present political boundaries were carved out to suit the imperialist designs of the British. In this process, little tribal communities (or call them nationalities), across whom the imperial boundaries were drawn, were divided into a number of political units. It was not a simple act for the tribesmen who do not realize the implications of this divide. However, they are constrained to find that their economy, their culture, religion, kin group, and, in fact, their entire idyllic world is divided. Now that the Eastern Himalayas lie in the zone of international conflict, the worst sufferers are these unfortunate divided communities.

We have proposed elsewhere that there are four distinct cultural zones in the Himalayas: the Muslim-Persian-Pamir-

Kashmir; the Hindu-Indian-southern slope; the lamaist Tibetan northern slope; and the predominantly tribal world of the Eastern Himalayas.¹ Using the concept of core and periphery² we have suggested that the above cultural zones are in fact extensions or peripheries of the cultural cores evolved in the west, south, and north respectively of the Himalayas. We have also pointed out that the predominantly tribal world of the eastern Himalayas does not belong to a cultural core of a civilizational centre. The divide between the Central and the Eastern Himalayas may roughly be taken as the watershed between the Kosi and Teesta rivers which, incidentally, is the eastern boundary between Nepal and India. This Eastern Himalayas contains parts of the second and the third and almost entirely the fourth cultural zone mentioned above.

Conceptual aspects of the frontier. Besides the cultural core against the marginal fringe, and political centre against the concept of periphery mentioned above, the geographers have been exercised with the concept of the heartland. In this context, reference may be made to J.C. Mackinder's works published in 1904 and 1919, in which he pointed out the significance of land power against the sea power in military strategy. "Western Europe had reached its commanding position through the supremacy of sea power, but with the improvement of land transportation the states occupying the great heartland of Eurasia could deny access to sea power and could extend their conquests over the 'rim-lands' of the continents." He emphasized the great strategic (locational) importance of Eastern Europe in his famous statement: "Who rules East Europe, commands the heartland: who rules the heartland, commands the islands (frontiers)?: who rules the world islands, commands the world."³ In case we examine the concepts of the cultural core, political centre and geographical heartland within the political boundaries of a given state such as India or, for that matter, China or Russia, concentration of various 'national' activities will be found inwardly directed. Conversely, such 'national' activities or specialized aspects may be found thinly distributed towards the fringe or frontiers. Thus, it is imperative to examine various aspects of the frontiers.

Frontiers are zones or belts of territory. They possess small or great areas which are subject to continued change as human

agencies bring about modifications in their character and utilization. "Frontiers are area, boundaries are linear in character. The former may be correctly described as 'natural', in so far as they are parts of the earth's surface; in some cases they fall into the category of geographical regions in as much as they possess the quality of individuality based on their functions as transitional zones. The latter are artificial since they are selected, defined and demarcated by men, here in conformity with the physical features of the terrain, there in complete disregard of such geographical factors."⁴ Further, frontiers, be their character physical, linguistic, religious or ethnic, cannot be moved; they may change their character, they may lose much of their frontier functions, but they must remain *in situ*. By contrast, boundaries are by no means immovable.

A frontier refers only to a transitional zone, while borderland should indicate exclusively the cis-boundary part of the transitional zone. The boundary, which is a line without width, has to undergo the process of delimitation. There are various stages of this process, such as delimitation proper (or allocation), definition (or description), delineation (or mapping) and demarcation (or abornement). In bygone days natural features such as mountains, rivers, deserts, marshes, forests or seas provided complete or continuous limits of states. But with the increasing sophistication in technology, these natural objects as dividing lines have been losing their significance. "It is usual to refer to an area in which peoples have intermingled, and a definite dividing line is difficult to draw as a frontier one. The frequent association of frontier in popular speech with a mountainous area is at least in Britain, accidental. The frontier in this sense is a zone, which by reasons of topography, climate or ethnography, is difficult to control. The frontier most often in the minds of Britons in the past happened to be the Indian frontier, particularly the North-West Frontiers in the Himalayas, hence the association. For the peoples of India and Pakistan, the frontier remains in the mountains. . ."⁵

To remove the above ambiguous situation, a distinction may be made between settlement frontier and political frontier. While the former refers to frontiers *within* a state, separating settled and unsettled areas, the latter refers to frontiers *between* states. Again, settlement frontiers have further been divided into

primary and secondary settlement frontiers. While on primary settlement frontiers, the density may be moderate to heavy, the secondary frontiers reflect the limited range of economic activities by a low density of population. The primary settlement frontiers witness a haphazard development characterized by "rudimentary socio-political relations marked by rebelliousness, lawlessness, and/or absence of laws". On the other hand, the development of secondary settlement frontiers is carefully planned, and based on a satisfactory communication network. Moreover, "primary settlement frontiers are historical features, while secondary settlement frontiers are currently found in many countries where an adverse physical environment, or inadequate techniques, hinder further advance of land-use and settlement. The primary settlement is marked by the *de facto* limit of the state's political authority whereas the political authority of modern states extends beyond the secondary settlement frontiers, and can be exerted when necessary. . . Special services are supplied for operation in the uninhabited areas, if necessary. The range of potential economic activities in the primary frontier is generally greater than in the secondary frontiers."⁶

Settlement frontiers disappear when they reach the furthest *de jure* limits. On the other hand, political frontiers will disappear only when two or more states compete for territory and delimit a boundary separating their areas of sovereignty. In this way, there is no *de jure* boundary beyond the political frontiers. Such political-territorial limits—especially in the context of modern international law—is a new development. However, Murty has successfully shown that even in the primitive groups territoriality was linked with communal ownership.⁷ Similarly, Prescott opines: "Political frontiers existed before boundaries, and the best current examples are to be found between tribal territories *within* some African and South American states. Research into political frontiers must, therefore, have a strong historical and anthropological basis. Political frontiers generally enjoyed less intensive economic development than the territories they separated. This was because the environment was less favourable, or because the resources of the existing state area were sufficient, or because it was the policy of the state to neglect the frontier, thereby enhancing its divisive character. Deserts, mountain ranges, rivers and river

plains, and woodlands have all formed frontiers at some stage in history. It follows from this that the frontiers were usually less densely populated than the flanking stages, and that the inhabitants of the frontiers, if any, enjoyed a lower standard of living."⁸

There is another aspect of the frontiers. It is said that the importance of the frontier lies in the pressure behind it. That is, frontiers are to be effectively carved out and their defensibility is to be undisputably established. Historically, one finds various nations and empires continually striving to strengthen their boundaries and making their frontiers as strategically perfect as possible. The rationale behind such developments has been that the frontiers are 'difficult' areas and to rule them effectively requires not only tact, foresight, strategy and planning, but also an amount of physical strength. In administrative idiom, physical strength means capabilities, efficiency, and alertness of the armed forces of the respective states.

Evolution of the British frontier policy: We learn that since time immemorial, Indians, Tibetans and Afghans had been under the awe of the Himalayas. The Himalayan peaks, snow, forests, rivers and the stupendous undulating land-mass had been a matter of reverence and mystery. The dominant communities in these countries lived in the riverine plains of the Indus-Ganges-Baahmaputra, the Tsanpo and the Kabul rivers. And the Himalayan region was left to the Paharis, Lhopa and Kaffirs respectively. Not only that, instances abound in which the rulers and communities from the plains, belaboured by strong invading forces, were obliged to retreat to the relatively inaccessible Himalayan ranges. In this way, the Himalayas attracted a number of royal fugitives, fortune-seekers, adventurers and explorers of various kinds. This continued to be the dominant pattern of the Himalayas vis-à-vis the countries around them till the time the British-Indian empire made its presence felt on the geo-political horizon of the region.

It goes without saying that Great Britain, being itself a sea-power, extended her dominion north and north-west-wards from her coastal bases of Bengal (Calcutta), Madras and Bombay. However, "in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian advance through Central Asia was indeed so irresistible that it

looked like the awe-inspiring progress of a glacier. To impede it by any means became for several decades the supreme concern of both Calcutta and London. It led to large-scale explorations and surveys of the intermediate zone, to manoeuvres and counter-manoevres, to threats of war and military promenades."⁹ From the north-east direction of the Himalayas, the Chinese empire was in the habit of extending her shadowy suzerainty towards her frontiers. However, this empire was progressively growing weaker. "So long as the effective presence of Russia and China could be kept out of the immediate vicinity of the Indian empire the British could afford to remain quiescent, and diplomatic activity alone was sufficient to keep the two powers away from areas adjacent to the Indian frontier."¹⁰ However, besides the Russian and the Chinese moves, the British were occasionally apprehensive of the French and the German empires.

From the earliest days of the British empire in India there were two opposing schools with reference to the British frontier policy—a forward policy, and a policy which sought to restrict, or to prevent expansion of the empire. It is also a known fact that the British became really aware of the frontier implications after their takeover of the Punjab and Sindh. In fact, the British-Indian frontier policy was evolved as an answer to the exigencies of the North-West frontiers of the empire. "From the conquest of the Punjab, in 1849, the frontier policy was in the hands of administrators of the Lawrence, of 'non-intervention' school, but the arrival of Lord Lytton in 1876, marked the end of what has been contemptuously termed 'masterly-inactivity'. It was the second territory that impressed upon statesmen the necessity for a scientific frontier. The military strategists became divided into two opposing camps, the Forward and the Stationary. Both these terms can be subdivided into the extremists and the moderates. The extreme section of the Forward School did not know where their advances would stop; the moderates desired the best possible strategic frontier with the least possible advance. The extreme advocates of non-intervention would have held the Indus line; the moderates were inclined to an advance, if it could have been proved to them that Russia constituted any real menace".¹¹

Davies reports that the Punjab administration had already

evolved three methods of forcing the tribesmen to surrender: fines, blockades, and expeditions. "Nevertheless, between 1849 and 1890, no less than forty-two expeditions had been considered necessary to counteract the marauding proclivities of the turbulent tribesmen."

The Himalayan frontier

The British-Indian empire touched the Himalayan region even in 1757, when they got hold of Bengal. It was further extended in 1817 by the Indo-Nepalese Treaty at Segauli, in 1826 by the Indo-Burmese war, and in 1843-49 by the annexation of Sindh and the Punjab. Needless to add, Great Britain, being herself a sea-power, proceeded to the Himalayan ranges rather reluctantly from three seaward imperial bases. Not only Central Asia and China, but also the Himalayan region remained an enigma to the British for decades. In the beginning of their contacts with the region, they left it to itself except for sending some teams of explorers, missions and intelligence surveyors. Occasionally, they thought of extending their trade interests to the trans-Himalayan regions. But two obstacles came in their way: First the trans-Himalayan regions were very thinly populated and extremely backward from the commercial point of view. Second, the cost of extending a transport network from the north Indian plains to the inaccessible and undulating Himalayas was considerably high. However, one point need not be lost sight of: The British had been able to establish the Indian empire because of their superior armed forces, besides other reasons. Accordingly, the British did not relish the idea of some other empire (such as Russia, Germany, France or China) looming large on her northern frontiers. Thus, in the fourth quarter of the last century, serious efforts were made to secure the natural boundary along the formidable barriers in the north.

With a view to attaining the above objective, the British evolved a number of strategies. "In the first place, steps were taken to eliminate all traces of Tibetan-cum-Chinese influence from cis-Himalayan areas such as Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and Bushahr, and turning them into satellite states under Indian protection. In the second place, Britain discouraged the political

ambitions of Indian princes in areas beyond the country's natural, geographical frontier. The Maharaja of Kashmir had substantial claims on the entire areas from the Karakoram Pass to Shahidulla, and the Mir of Hunza had certain rights on the Taghdumbash Pamir and the Raskam, both lying beyond the Indus watershed. (Similarly, the Maharaja of Sikkim had claim over the Chumbi valley and, in fact, had his own establishment over there.) Guided by geo-political, rather than legal considerations, Britain did everything possible to dissuade the Maharaja and the Mir from pursuing their claims beyond the Indus watershed and to encourage the Chinese to try and take the trans-frontier areas under their effective control. Thirdly, whereas in the areas where traditional and customary boundaries existed, as, for instance, between Ladakh and Tibet, or in maintaining the *status quo*, her surveyors and explorers recorded the territorial limits beyond which Tibet or China were in control; in other areas where the boundary was not clear and a fresh alignment was called for, she generally followed the principle of the watershed or the highest range, while getting the border defined through bilateral agreements, as for instance, in the case of the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet in 1890, and the McMahon Line in 1914.¹² Fourthly, since the 1880's the British constantly adopted the policy of interposing protected or weak but friendly countries (the buffer states) between their administered territories and the possessions of formidable neighbours whom they desired to keep away. Thus, Afghanistan between India and Russia; Tibet between India and China; and Thailand between India (including Burma) and the French Indo-China were carved out as the outer buffers. Similarly, within the geographical limits of India, the British contrived to carve out a number of princely states with different shades of autonomy ranging from Kashmir through the East Punjab states, the United Provinces hill states, Nepal and Sikkim to Bhutan.

Furthermore, a number of military and diplomatic steps were undertaken to secure this northern boundary. Apart from sending expeditions to the north-west and the north-east frontiers, fighting wars with Afghanistan and dispatching the Young-husband Expedition to Lhasa, a number of treaties were signed between 1890 and 1915: the Sino-British Convention (1890) defining the frontier of Sikkim; the drawing of the Durand Line

(1893); Indo-Bhutanese Treaty (1910) and the drawing of the McMahon Line 1914. Thus "the Indian frontier from Kashmir hinterland to where it passes north of the protected states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan to the Brahmaputra, is the finest natural combination of boundary and barrier that exists in the world. It stands alone. For the greater part of its length only the Himalayan eagle can trace it. It lies amidst the eternal silence of vast snowfields and ice-bound peaks . . . never was there such a God-given boundary set to such a vast, impressive and stupendous frontier."¹³ Sir Thomas Holdich's exclamation may be better appreciated if one remembers the high military capability and excellent diplomatic skill of the British in the first two decades of the present century. However, on empirical verification, Holdich's God-given boundary had never been a no-man's land. In fact, the frontiers had been inhabited by a number of communities.

Communities on the frontiers in the Eastern Himalayas: It goes without saying that the British were alien rulers to the Indian community and, by and large, maintained a distance with the ruled. As rulers their concern was centred around acquisition of territories and resources thereof to keep them under control. When the boundaries of such territories were drawn, efforts were made to take them to the strategic points on the natural and geographical limits of the country—so that they could be defended by the armed forces against the competing empires. That is why, while acquiring the territories, many a time, the communities residing on various distant frontier areas—and invariably much smaller in size, and rather localized tribesmen—were lost sight of. While delimiting and making the boundaries effective on the frontiers, the areas where Afridis and Pathans in the north-west, Kanjuti and Kazagh along north of Kashmir, Lhopa graziers in Chumbi valley, Monpa, Aka, Dafla, Shingpho and a number of small communities in Arunachal Pradesh lived, were divided. So far as the tribesmen were concerned, since time immemorial, they had been mobile across the so-called boundaries in pursuit of trade, agricultural activities and pasturing. Their properties, kinsmen, culture, language and, in a loose sense, their world, were divided by the international boundaries. As soon as the political boundaries were affected, the communities became divided across the

boundaries. For these communities, the Himalayas had not been the frontier. In fact, their entire world revolved around the Himalayas: the core of their culture—in the material as well as abstract sense—lies in the Himalayas. In fact, for the small communities, the boundary is something like a sword piercing through their territories. It divides them and turns brothers into foreigners. It is considered to be an imposition by a distant, awe-inspiring authority and it is grudgingly accepted as a limiting factor in their actual economic, social and cultural intercourse.

Unlike the north-west frontiers, the geo-political situation of the eastern frontier in the nineteenth century was different. The Tibetan plateau and the lamaist theocracy in the north did not pose a challenge to the British. However, there was the French colony in the east across the British empire in Burma. In the north-east, there was the 'sleeping Chinese giant', which was weak enough to be divided in spheres of influence among the then imperial powers of the world. In between the French and the Chinese empires there was an extensive area inhabited by a plethora of Mongoloid tribes which could not pose a challenge to the British power. To the British these marginal tribesmen could offer no commercially favourable transactions. Thus, for a long time, the Brahmaputra valley remained the effective domain of the British empire in the east. The tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and the hills of Tripura and Manipur were nominally under the British empire. At times, armed expeditions were sent to subjugate the hillmen and regulate their relations with the plainsmen.¹⁴

It may not be out of place to put on record the fact that the experience gained on the north-west frontier in dealing with the tribes were largely duplicated in the north-east frontier. The same policy of fines, blockades and expeditions were followed in the beginning. The entire north-east region was divided into British administered and unadministered territories; then it became excluded and partially excluded areas, for which an inner line was carved out. For our purpose, a few points are significant. Firstly, the British maintained two boundaries—one, an inner administrative line, upto which the region was under effective British control and, an outer international boundary, which was left to be negotiated with Tibet and China and,

ultimately, came to be known as the McMahon Line. Secondly, in the areas, between the two lines, the tribal communities were left to be governed by their tribal traditions, customs, usages and norms. Effective British control was non-existent. In fact, tribal chiefs were granted a number of rewards in cash and kind for orderly behaviour. Thirdly, means of transport and communication and other infrastructural facilities were not extended to these areas. Consequently, these areas remained economically and technologically primitive. Fourthly, the policy of inner line permits partially led to a situation in which normal tribal-non-tribal interaction came to be greatly hampered.

Political boundaries normally create conflicts for the communities divided across the borders, as is the case with the north-eastern region of India. When such a divided community with claims of a legendary—imagined or real past grandeur—feels distressed because of the divisive role of the frontier and, in consequence, develops a feeling of being cheated by the 'distant' nation-state, it refuses to extend its loyalty to the 'distant' and vaguely known 'heartland' and accept the legality of the political boundaries which constrains its activities. Many a time, such a community may challenge the very foundation of the nation-state. In such a case, which is not infrequent, the nation-state takes the help of the armed forces to re-assert its domain. In such a situation, the presence of the armed forces (largely composed of non-local personnel) in a community, which feels itself distant from the heartland's political authority, distorts the logical developmental priorities and accepted welfare activities of the state.¹⁵ This leads to a vicious circle in the sense that the armed forces of the established central authority fail to instil a sense of national defence in the frontier community, which invariably considers the former as the agent-provocateurs, who refuse to appreciate the sensibilities of the latter. As a consequence, whether it is the 'slaves of the cool mountains'¹⁶, or the politicians of the Highland Burma¹⁷, or the Singpho tribesmen of Arunachal Pradesh¹⁸, these divided communities pose a formidable challenge to the existence of the large nation-states.

For a meaningful exposition of the implications of the frontiers, it will be worthwhile to uncover the various facets—the geographical and ecological, historical and cultural, economic and strategic and political and administrative. Keeping in view

the above aspects, it will be rewarding to study any one of the communities such as the Bhotia, Monpa, Singpho, etc. on the frontiers. This will not only be an academic exercise but these communities in distress may also be helped to solve some of the serious economic, social and cultural problems. In fact, such an enterprise is already in existence elsewhere in which administrators, planners and social scientists are helping the communities to solve their routine problems and come out with the solutions to the disabilities caused by the international boundary.¹⁹ Here is an area which provides a challenge to geographers, historians, anthropologists, economists, public men and the administrators to sit together and work out a strategy to help the communities to solve the problems originating from the political boundaries. Whether it is parasitic economic activities such as the trans-frontier illegal trade, cultural deprivation, evolving of a primer for the nursery school in a small frontier dialect, or community participation in welfare and nation-building activities—these and many others may be worked out, provided the academicians come out of their ivory towers, and administrators from their bureaucratic cocoons.

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