

Forging New Frontiers: Integrating Tawang with India, 1951

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With the departure of the British from South Asia in 1947, the transition of the NEFA (North East Frontier Agency, later Arunachal Pradesh) border from the colonial to the post-colonial era followed a predictable and conventional geopolitical script. India began consolidating its frontiers to create borders where none had existed. It adopted a restrained policy of non-interference, in which local traditions—political, cultural and social—were respected and protected. Institutional support and effective policy implementation proved to be the tools that made NEFA, including parts of it that had hitherto never been administered by British India, a part of modern India. The article draws on hitherto unpublished field research carried out in the Tawang tract to tell an oral history account of the integration of Tawang from the perspective of the local people. It draws on more than a hundred conversations with the people in the region and the author's access to local administrative documents, and locally published materials to examine India's approach towards local identities as New Delhi began the process of administering Tawang in 1951.

Keywords: Frontier administration, Major Ralengnao Khathing, McMahon Line, Monpas, Simla Convention, Tawang, Tibet

Officially, Tawang became a part of India after the Simla Agreement of 1914 (Mehra 1980: 78), but it is among those parts of Arunachal Pradesh where the Tibetan administration held sway till 1951, well after the Indian independence from British rule in 1947. After being administered by India for a little over a decade, Tawang was occupied by the Chinese in 1962 for almost two months. While the spread of Indian administration into erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and the later Sino-Indian conflict have been documented, in all the writing on Tawang's history scholars have used a top-down approach to study the region, by drawing on the experiences of major political, bureaucratic and military actors. A bottom-up study of the people of Tawang and the impact of the British Indian and Indian policies on them has remained largely unattempted.

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The people of Tawang took to Indian administration like fish to water and remained steadfast in their loyalty through the 1962 Chinese occupation. This from a people who had experienced Indian administration for barely a decade did not occur by accident. It stemmed from India's restrained and sensitive non-interference with local tradition, a policy backed by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, his powerful tribal affairs advisor, Verrier Elwin, and a superb cadre of officers that was organised in 1953 into the Indian Frontier Administrative Service. The sophistication of this policy is reflected in an entry in Elwin's personal diaries, which remarks on Nehru's belief that this frontier was not necessarily India, but it could be made so (Elwin n.d.).

The author, while living and travelling in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh between September 2008 and June 2009 studied local archival material and conducted hundreds of interviews and conversations with local people to understand their perception of Indian administration. These voices from the border areas and their oral accounts illustrate how local narrative enriches and often complicates the national narrative. Through the writings of scholars who have studied Sino-Indian politics, such as, Neville Maxwell (1997), Steven Hoffmann (1990), John Garver (2001), Parshottam Mehra (1980) and A.G. Noorani (2011) among others, one can judge the legal position of the boundary dispute. So, although legally Tawang has been a part of India since 1919 (Noorani 2011: 171), it is still at the centre of the Chinese and Indian border dispute. This article explores how the Indian policies for administering and retaining Tawang were implemented and received by the locals; and how these shaped the ground reality as opposed to the official positions that languished merely on paper. The local narrative suggests that though Tibetan administrators effectively controlled the lives of the people of Tawang, the colonial control did not prevent them from claiming their Indian identity when the opportunity posed itself.

BACKGROUND

The border between British India's NEFA and the pre-1950 Tibetan ecclesiastical state was not a classical High Asia non-demarcated border, where the influence of one state gradually shaded off into the increasingly perceptible influence of another. This was largely true on the British side, where New Delhi's influence, fully exercised in Assam's Brahmaputra valley, diminished as the mountains climbed towards the Himalayan watershed. A physical British presence in the foothills gave way to the imposition of allegiance on local tribes and its enforcement through armed punitive expeditions. The major exception to this was north-west NEFA where the British influence over the Monpa tribal belt ended far short of the Himalayan watershed. Tibetan influence extended through the Buddhist-dominated Tawang, Dirang and Kalaktang valleys. On the Tibetan side, jurisdiction was lightly exercised but it went right up to the borders

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of the monastic state, through the systematic and regulated imposition of monastic and non-monastic tributes.

This traditional border prevailed for the duration of British rule over India. Even the delineation of this border in the Simla Convention of 1914, in which a linear boundary, the McMahon Line, was created, did little to change the status quo on the ground because the British never enforced the new border (Mehra 1980: 118). The British rulers of India sporadically debated the merits of establishing a physical presence up to the putative border—the Lightfoot Mission of 1938 to Tawang and establishing administrative control over Dirang in 1944 were manifestations of that debate—but World War II preoccupations and financial constraints held back the British from any firm forward move. The Tibetan authorities too, apart from their conquest of Powo in 1927 and launching some tax collection missions, did little to buttress their colonial rule over the Buddhist areas around Tawang and Mechuka.

Both sides' status quoist and laissez faire approach to the borderlands was transformed by the almost simultaneous emergence in the late 1940s of two nationalistic and territorially ambitious states: India and China. Separated initially by the Tibetan buffer, China's occupation of Tibet in 1950 created territorial contiguity and, inevitably, territorial conflict between what could already be discerned as two major rising powers.

While this transition of the Tibet–NEFA border from the colonial to the post-colonial era followed a predictable and conventional geopolitical script, the two new states adopted radically different approaches aimed at creating national identities and integrating their new borderlands into their respective national mainstreams. In effect, both sides assumed ownership of what had earlier been a relatively easy attitude towards areas of controversial ownership. China, given the recent triumphs of the Communist Party, adopted the path of ideology, imposing communism in order to 'modernise' the 'feudal' arrangements of governance that existed in Tibet, in which political control was vested in the clergy.

India, by contrast, adopted an unusually restrained policy of non-interference, in which local traditions—political, cultural and social—were respected and protected. There was institutional support for such an arrangement, backed as it was by Jawaharlal Nehru. For India, because it had adopted the British legacy wholeheartedly, the consolidation of territories had an element of defining borders as they were inherited as part of the same legacy.

Beijing, on the other hand, was rejecting colonial borders and harking back to late imperial period, in which China exercised control over Tibet, albeit episodically. This was a far from peaceful process and, in fact, was actively resisted through rebellions and uprising and the process continues to this day. The Chinese strategy, therefore, was bogged down in controlling Tibetan territories and was not fixed on demarcating borders (Government of India 1960). Some scholars believe that China's main interest still lies in controlling the Buddhist-influenced areas that were earlier administered by Tibet (Murty 1983: 112).

THE TAWANG QUESTION

Meanwhile, India set about integrating the populations that were perceived to fall on the Indian side of the McMahon Line. The McMahon Line had been agreed, somewhat reluctantly and with divergent aims (Richardson 1945: para 35), through a tripartite agreement between Tibet, China and the British Government of India. The Simla Convention of 1914 was initialled by all three parties but the Chinese withdrew from the agreement before the final signatures were put on the document (Richardson 1945: para 38). The basis of Chinese disagreement was territorial differences with Tibet in defining the frontiers of the two states. The Simla Convention, however, had managed to settle the India–Tibet border through discussions between the Tibetan representative, Lonchen Shatra, and the Government of India delegates, Sir Henry McMahon and Charles Bell. It included in British territory the district of Tawang, which had thus far been administered by Tibetan officials (Richardson 1945: para 39). Lonchen Shatra, being Tibetan, understood the sensitivity of the Tawang transfer and, in fact, suggested that the district should be taken over ‘quickly and tactfully’ (Richardson 1945: para 39). But the compulsions of the Great War in Europe caused the matter to be set aside (Mehra 1980: 78). It was not, however, completely forgotten.

Ever since the 1920s, as China became stronger and more interested in Tibet, the question of strengthening the claim on Tawang was reinforced by administrators of British India. The Political Officer of the Balipara Frontier Tract, Captain G.A. Nevill’s report in 1921–22 on the British paying a *posa* (tribute)¹ of ₹5,000 to Tawang of which ₹4,500 was being transferred to Drepung monastery in Lhasa provoked A.W. Botham, Chief Secretary in the early 1920s to say, ‘Tawang being a dependency of Lhasa and Tibet being a dependency of China, we are in a way paying tribute to China for part of the Darrang District’ (Reid 1997: 301–03).

As the Balipara Frontier Tract became an ‘Excluded Area’, according to the Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Order, 1936, and came under the direct administration of the governor from 1 April 1937, questions about Chinese and Tibetan influence in the Northeast leading to strengthening Chinese claims to the region, became prominent again in 1936.

On 17 September 1936, the Assam Chief Secretary wrote to G.S. Lightfoot, Political Officer, Balipara Frontier Tract, ‘the latest Chinese atlases show almost the whole of the tribal area south of the McMahon Line up to the administered border of Assam as included in China’ (cited in Reid 1997: 294). This worried the officials because the Chinese already claimed a large chunk of territory east of Tawang as part of the Sikang province, and the Tibetans, over whom the Chinese claimed suzerainty, were collecting taxes in Tawang, and further south up to Dirang and Kalaktang (Reid 1997: 294).

¹ *Posa* was a tribute that originated in 1844 when it was sanctioned by the Government of India in commutation of the claims of the Bhutias.

Thus, the Chief Secretary urged his Political Officer that the Government of India must consider some effective steps to challenge activities that may support a claim by China to Tawang itself, or even to Bhutan and Sikkim (Reid 1997: 295). The proposal is to

demand from the Tibetan Government, which has recently re-affirmed the McMahon Line, that collection of revenue for the latter Government in the Tawang area should be discontinued, and the question whether it will be necessary to introduce Indian administration to replace Tibetan officials in that area has been left for further consideration... The suggestion which has now been made to this Government is that it is highly desirable to emphasise the interest of British India in the Tawang area either by *actual tours* or by *collecting the revenue ourselves*, since the mere reproduction of the McMahon Line on Survey of India Maps would be insufficient to correct false impressions which have gained ground in the years since 1914. (cited in Reid 1997: 295)

Two expeditions were sent in to assess the mood in Tawang; Capt. G.A. Nevill went to Tawang in 1914 and was followed by G.S. Lightfoot in 1938. Both came back with the recommendations to set up administration of some kind in Tawang. Capt. Nevill specifically wrote that a European officer should be stationed, at least for a time, at Tawang (Reid 1997: 289). Nevill, who remained in the Tawang region from 1913 to 1928, wrote a prescient note that would be proved correct in the 1962 war. He wrote, 'should China gain control of Tibet the Tawang country is particularly adapted for a secret and easy entrance into India' (cited in Reid 1997: 292–93).

Thus, Tawang as the gateway to India gained currency in British India administration. It was Lightfoot, however, who recommended most forcefully that the British expand their administration to Tawang. The Lightfoot expedition reached Tawang on 30 April 1938, creating a shockwave within the Tibetan administration that was felt all the way to Lhasa. The Tibetan government protested its entry into Tawang, asking B.J. Gould, the Political Officer in Sikkim, that the expedition be withdrawn immediately (Reid 1997: 297).

Gould had earlier met the Kashag in Lhasa in the autumn of 1936 in which Tawang was discussed. The Kashag's attitude was that until 1914 Tawang had definitely been Tibetan; and that they regarded the adjustment of the Tibet–Indian boundary as part of the general adjustment and determination of boundaries contemplated in the 1914 Simla Convention and if the Kashag could, with British India's help, secure a definite Sino-Tibetan boundary they would be glad to observe the Indo-Tibetan border as defined in 1914. Robert Reid cites government records to say that the Kashag

had been encouraged in thinking that His Majesty's government and the Government of India sympathised with this way of regarding the matter owing to the fact that at no time since the Convention and Declaration of 1914 had the

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Indian Government taken steps to question Tibetan, or to assert British authority in the Tawang area. (Reid 1997: 296)

To this Reid adds that there is no doubt that the boundary was definitely determined and at no point was Lightfoot to give the impression that it could be reopened.

Lightfoot completed his expedition and returned to the plains to report his findings and recommendations. They included:

- (1) The Tibetan Government should be asked to withdraw their officials, viz., the Tsona Dzungpons and their assistants. With them will automatically disappear their exactions of tribute and forced labour....
- (2) It would be of the utmost advantage if the withdrawal of the Tibetan officials from the monastery could be arranged, making it, what in fact it is, a Monpa monastery. So inextricably are State and Religion intermingled in Tibet that till the Tibetan monastic officials are withdrawn, Tibetan influence and intrigue must persist in the surrounding country. (Reid 1997: 297–98)

His recommendation, in fact, was that Monpas should be elected to the religious high offices of the monastery in Tawang. It is interesting that Lightfoot's vision was realised 70 years later in 2008 when the Dalai Lama, for the first time, appointed a local Monpa monk from Rama camp, a village south of Se La, as Rimpoche of the Tawang monastery. Till then only Tibetans had been selected for the post (Gombu 2008).

The acting Governor of Assam Sir Gilbert Hogg strongly accepted Lightfoot's recommendations and forwarded them to the Government of India suggesting that administrative staff should consist of an Agent at Tawang and an Assistant Agent in Dirang Dzong; and half a platoon of Assam Rifles should be stationed at Tawang and a full platoon at Dirang Dzong (Reid 1997: 288). His estimates of the total cost were ₹41,617 in non-recurring expenditure and ₹37,896 in recurring annual expenditure for running the administration (Reid 1997: 300). Apart from finances, there was the assessment that the people of these areas are 'crying for a just administration and would greatly welcome our rule under which they would be infinitely better off' (cited in Reid 1997: 288).

These recommendations were followed up the same year with a proposal to send up yet another expedition while a decision on administering Tawang was yet to be made. But financial constraints rendered this idea stillborn. The central government in London ruled that a second expedition could not be allowed because it 'might result in the Government of India having to undertake permanent occupation in order to fulfil their obligations towards the Monbas'. Then in July 1939, it was fixed that the question of future policy for the area should be decided a year later (cited in Reid 1997: 300). But this intention fell by the wayside with the outbreak of World War II (Raghavan 2010: 230).

As the war in Europe came to a close and India moved towards its independence, the British Government of India managed to exert control over areas south of Se La,

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the massif that separates the Tawang valley from the rest of the Monpa belt. Assam Rifles posts and hospitals were set up in Rupa and Dirang Dzong; dropping grounds were cleared for air drops of supplies and the locals were actively discouraged from paying any non-monastic tribute to the Dzongpons who came from north of Se La. But the question of realising the full territorial potential of the 1914 Simla Convention and implementing the McMahon Line on the ground was left for the successor Indian state 'upon whom alone the rights and obligations arising from the existing Treaty provisions' devolved (Chakravarty 1953: 32).

TIBET IN TAWANG

While the debate about the Tawang tract raged in the New Delhi and London ends of the Government of India, Pema Gombu's account illustrates the life of the people of the Tawang tract in the 1930s and the 1940s. At the heart of the border dispute are these people who remained oblivious to this complex historical debate. Pema Gombu was born in 1925 into the family of the Gaon Bura (GB, village headman) of Lhou, Tsewang Gombu who was an important man in the local power dynamic. Tsewang Gombu was one of the only three GBs in Tawang region, that is, the area north of Se La, up to the Bhutan border, including Lumla and Ziminthang. This area was controlled by Tibetan officials known as Dzongpons. Pema Gombu of Lhou village recounts from his memory of the Tibetan rule.

The GB of each village was selected by the people of the village and then the Dzongpons had to approve the choice.

I remember the names of two Dzongpons who were here: Dorong Thang and Ganden Pa from Tsona. The Dzongpon was changed every three years. He was a powerful official; even the Tawang Gompa came under him. But the Dzongpons did not usually interfere in the working of the monastery. Each functioned in their own sphere. The Head Lama, or Rimpoche of the Tawang Monastery was nominated from Lhasa, by the Dalai Lama.

I remember these two well because they murdered my father and what they did changed my life.

My father was Tsewang Gombu and he was a proud man who would not bend before anyone. He was the GB of Lhou, but the GBs of two other villages were jealous of my father because my father was given the responsibility for all the material that came to Gyanghar Dzong² in Tawang. The other two Gaon Buras collected silver coins from their villages to bribe the Dzongpons, so that they would murder my father.

² It was the official seat of power of the Tibetan officials based in Tawang.

I was 19 years old when my father was killed in 1944.

One day, the Dzungpons invited my father and stepmother for a party, which continued all day and well into the night. The Dzungpons made sure both parents were completely drunk and then at night they killed my father. His body was never found and my stepmother, who was also sleeping under the influence of alcohol, never realised what happened. The Dzungpons took all my stepmother's jewellery and then locked her up in jail in Gyanghar. They released her after a month. My father had come to the party riding on an elaborately decorated horse. They also confiscated that.

Meanwhile, back in my village, Lhou, I received the news that my father had been locked away in a jail by the Dzungpons. So I travelled from Lhou to Gyanghar to get him released. But on the way I was stopped by Chhungi Rinzin, a Tibetan friend who lived near Gyanghar Dzong; he was the Nyertsen (storeman) of Gyanghar Dzong. He told me I must run away or I would surely be killed as well.

I went and picked up my friend Karma Gombu from Jang—he was also my relative—and I decided to go away to Lhasa to complain to the Tibetan government and try and get justice. It took me four days to organise my journey and during this time I lived outside my village for fear of being arrested by the Dzungpons. I had no food to carry along because the Dzungpon's men had raided my house and looted it while looking for me.

To have any chance of reaching Lhasa without being captured, I had to leave behind my wife and new-born daughter. My wife said, 'Don't go, they will follow you and kill you and then what will I do with a small daughter?' But I refused to listen to her entreaties. Everyone knew that I would avenge my father's murder, and the Dzungpons would surely try to kill me as well, so I had to leave secretly.

It was a tough and dangerous journey. I shaved my head and wore a monk's robes to disguise myself. On the way we begged for food and relied on the hospitality of strangers with whom we stayed. It took seven days and nights for us to reach Lhasa, even though we walked almost continuously. We took a route that skirted the village of Mago, and then crossed over the mountains into Tibetan-inhabited area. The first Tibetan village that we reached was Shou; from there we headed for Tsona Dzong. It was the month of March and it was still bitterly cold.

When we finally reached Lhasa, we were totally confused. It was a very large city with lots of houses, just like Delhi or Mumbai. We set out to look for my father's friend, Tsongpan La, who was a rich, educated businessman who used to travel between Lhasa and Tawang. During his visits to Tawang, he had befriended my father. Eventually we found him and he helped us in framing out an application to the Tibetan Kashag. There were four officials, called Tsangwas, who worked under the Kashag, who handled matters like this. We framed out our application to them.

The Tsangwa handed over our case to the Chigung Legung, a lower official, to frame the case and submit it to the Kashag. It took six months to frame the case, but once that was done, I was safe. The officials told me that if any harm came to me, the Dzongpons in Tawang would be blamed. So seven months after fleeing from Tawang, I travelled back to my wife and baby child.

My wife cried a great deal when I got back to Lhou and gave me hell for going away and leaving her alone! The Tibetan officials had harassed her mercilessly in my absence. There had been no way for her to provide for herself and our daughter, except by working and the Tibetan officials had made it really hard for her to find work.

The officials in Lhasa took two and a half years to deliver justice for my father's murder and during that period, I had to travel thrice to Lhasa. The third time, I took my wife along, leaving my daughter behind with relatives.

The case was decided in a final hearing in Lhasa, before a senior Rimshi, who was the equivalent of a District Commissioner. For the final hearing, the Dzongpon who had murdered my father, Ganden Pa Lobsang Tsering was also summoned from Tawang. In the Rimshi's courtroom, there was a very acrimonious confrontation between the Dzongpon and me. I accused him of murdering my father and asked him whether he had been made a Dzongpon to look after the people in Tawang or to murder them and harass their families? Lobsang Tsering denied anything to do with my father's death. I said that the whole of Tawang knew that he had called him for a party and that he had disappeared that night. There was a lot of shouting in the courtroom and finally the case was decided in my favour.

The Dzongpon was removed forthwith from his post in Tawang. All the stuff the Dzongpon had stolen was returned and he was fined by the court. He had to pay more than ₹2 lakhs in silver coins. This was deposited in Lhasa. And I was paid compensation, which I carried back to India. The compensation was paid in large red currency notes.

After my father's death, a man called Sange Rinchin had been appointed GB in his place. Rinchin was from Sharo village, between Jang and Lhou; I believe he had definitely been involved in my father's death because the Dzongpons appointed him GB after murdering my father. So, we lived in fear until the Tibetans were thrown out in 1951. (Gombu 2008)

INDIA CLAIMS TAWANG

The Indian government's decision to enter Tawang was taken only after the Chinese government declared the 1914 Simla Convention null and void in November 1949

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(Chakravarty 1953: File CGA, 140/50, 216). The urgency of the situation was further highlighted by the Chinese ambassador's refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the Indian Mission in Lhasa and the Trade Agencies in Yatung and Gyantse in reply to an Indian government note of 31 October 1950 (Mullik 1971: 67). Soon after, two important decisions were taken.

First, in November 1950, a small committee of military experts with a representative of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) in Shillong would visit the NEFA agencies and propose the places near the frontier at which the Assam Rifles units should be posted (Chakravarty 1953: File CGA, 92/51, 69).³

Second, a high-powered committee presided over by the Deputy Minister of Defence Maj. Gen. M.S. Himmatsinghji, with representatives of Defence, Communication, Home, External Affairs and the IB would be formed to study the problems created by the Chinese aggression in Tibet and to make recommendations about the measures that should be taken to improve administration, defence, communication, etc., of all the frontier areas. This committee was known as the 'North and North East Border Defence Committee' and it sent its report in two parts.

The committee discussed the advisability of establishing a post in Tawang and decided that the matter must be referred to the Government of India for instructions. While awaiting the government's response, it was decided to establish a small post at Senge Dzong, south of Se La Pass on the road that winds up from Dirang Dzong. But the Indian government was clearly ready to move. The reply to the committee's deliberations was sent to the Adviser to the Governor of Assam (Chakravarty 1953: DO no. D. 232-NGO-50 in CGA 140/50, 146) on 10 December 1950 instructing him to establish a post at Tawang 'without delay'. New Delhi's reason for hastening the move of administration into Tawang was 'the fact that the Tibetans have in the past disputed this territory is, indeed, a very strong argument why we should effectively occupy it before the Tibetans or the Chinese assert their claim to it' (Chakravarty 1953: DO no. D. 232-NGO-50 in CGA 140/50, 146).

This, by no means, meant that New Delhi had closed its mind to negotiations on the border issue but it did not want China to negotiate from a position of strength. At this early stage of the border dispute it is apparent that India may have been open to giving up Tawang, but definitely not as a unilateral concession. As the reply states,

In the past we offered an adjustment of the boundary in this area but this can only be done by negotiation and then we could perhaps use it as a bargaining counter for some adjustment in our favour elsewhere. We cannot agree to a unilateral occupation of Tawang by the Communists (Chakravarty 1953: DO no. D. 232-NGO-50 in CGA 140/50, 146).

³ 'Under the terms of Army Headquarter letter No. 6904/1/MOI, dated 12 November 1950, a committee was constituted to examine the possibility of Chinese communist troops occupying the areas in the disputed territory south of the McMahon Line and to consider the feasibility of advancing the outpost of the Assam Rifles in order to forestall such ingress.'

While Tawang was in the middle of yet another bitter winter, unknown to most local people a major change was coming to the monastery town. Already burdened under Tibetan rule, the Monpa tribals were also suffering the after-effects of the massive 15 August 1950 earthquake that had levelled many houses in the region.

Local accounts say that the Tibetan administration was harsh. They taxed the locals according to their land holdings, made them work for free and took away their agricultural produce. If someone did not give taxes, the Tibetan administration would jail them or take off their shirts and beat them with a cane (Wangchu 2008).

Karma Wangchu, who went on to become an MLA from Tawang, recounts the Tibetan methods of tax collection,

In those days if you had *Kongpo*⁴ to eat, you used to be considered wealthy. All the rice we grew was paid as taxes to the Tibetans. In the old days, we ate the residue of what was left after making *Chhang* (local beer) from *Kongpo* and *Kodo*.⁵ Now we feed that to animals. Then, after the Indian government came, it became a status symbol to eat rice in order to appear wealthy (Wangchu 2008).

At the head of the Tibetan administration in Tawang was a Dzungpon, the equivalent of District Commissioner. The equivalent of a Circle Officer was a Sinyer. These two were the main administrators. Sinyers were the people who had the job of assessing the people to tax and so the locals maintained good relations with them. When a Sinyer came calling, he was served *Chhang* (the local rice beer) and good food (Khandu 2008).

Their office in Tawang was in the low-lying area of Gyanghar Dzong. In summer, the Dzungpons went to Tsona Dzong, which is now across the border in Tibet, and in winter, they moved back to Tawang. The Dzungpons who were posted to Dirang, south of Se La, were nominated from the local tribe. Two Monpa officials, monks from the monastery, would be sent to Dirang, but the Dzungpons in Tawang were Tibetans (Rustomji 1983: 138). These were the centres of power in Tibetan outlying areas from where the colonial system of extracting resources as taxes for sending into the Tibetan heartland was carried out.

In January, there is a *Torgya Puja* (Dungyur) in Tawang monastery. The Dzungpons in Dirang would collect grain, wheat, etc., and send it for the *Puja* and it would be used to feed the Lamas in Tawang. But the grains collected in Tawang as taxes would be sent to Tsona Dzong. There was no major objection from the public to carrying materials from Dirang because it was for a religious purpose. But there were some objections to the collection of taxes for sending to Tsona, but those who objected were publicly punished (Gombu 2008). There was an elaborate relay system to convey the grain from Dirang to Tawang. It was accompanied by two people from the Gompa

⁴ Poor quality of maize grain.

⁵ A poor quality grain grown locally in Tawang.

and at each staging point, the GB of that village would nominate porters to carry the material up to the next stop (Gombu 2008).

KHATHING'S ROLE IN TAWANG

It was in this scenario in Tawang that Major Ralengnao Khathing of 2nd Assam Rifles was leading the Indian administration. The Adviser to the Governor of Assam N.K. Rustomji issued the final instructions to Khathing and they were unequivocal: 'Your task is to occupy Tawang' (Khathing 1951b). He was instructed to behave in a way that Indian administration in Tawang was in the most natural order of things and he was to treat all queries from Tibetans with the response that what he was doing in Tawang was an extension of what was already being done in other areas like Rupa and Dirang Dzong. He was to make it clear to all Tibetan officials that the 'jurisdiction in the area' vests in him and not in them.

Khathing was expected to report the extent of the Tibetan influence in the area, the nature of taxes imposed by Tibetan officials and the response of the locals and the Tibetans to the new administration. Khathing's instructions for the Tibetan officials were to impress power on them, but for the local population he was to announce that 'none of their religious practices would be interfered with. There will be no forced labour and everything needed will be duly paid for' (Khathing 1951b). The governor's message, as conveyed to Khathing, was to conduct the operation with 'tact, firmness and discretion'. These were the first seeds of an enlightened administration entering NEFA. These early instructions by Governor Jairam Das Daulatram and his Adviser Nari Rustomji, of dealing with the local populations with sensitivity, would soon be adopted as policy under the guidance of the anthropologist Elwin. But clearly, the administrators of the time were already schooled in the need for a discerning outlook towards local populations and the expertise of Elwin followed it up through an institutional framework.

Meanwhile, armed with this telegram, on 6 February 1951 Major Khathing rode in with the intention of claiming Tawang as Indian territory and changed not only the map of India but also the fate of the people in the area.

Khathing's entourage was largely Assam Rifles troops but also some locals who had joined in along the route. Pema Gombu walked alongside Khathing. Pema Gombu recounts his journey with Khathing (Gombu 2008):

In those days, most well-off Monpas from Tawang used to winter in Dirang. My wife was also wintering in Dirang in the winter of 1950. I took several horses with me and travelled to Dirang in January 1951 to bring back my wife to Tawang.

When I reached Dirang, I found the place abuzz. The APO, Major Bob Khathing, was collecting horses for an expedition to Tawang. For me, this was a

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great opportunity to strike back at the Tibetan government in Tawang. I told my wife that she should continue to stay in Dirang for some time and offered my horses—I had several—and my services to Major Khathing's expedition.

When the expedition was ready, we set off. Along with Major Khathing, there was Kotuk Lama. We spent the first night at Senge Dzong, the next night at Nuranang and then, on the third day, it was on to Jang, just short of the Tawang Chu.

I was just one of the many people in that expedition, but Major Khathing clearly realised that, being a local from Tawang, I would be useful to him. I was, of course, pleased to be of service to Major Khathing and even more glad that the Tibetans' days were numbered.

When we set up camp at Jang, the Political Interpreter,⁶ a man called Sonam from Lees village, came to tell me that Major Khathing wanted to speak to me.

I was worried. A senior official wanting to speak to someone usually meant trouble. I told Sonam that I had done nothing wrong. Sonam told me not to worry, Major Khathing only wanted to get to know me.

I was quaking as we entered the Political Officer's tent. Major Khathing asked me how I had decided to join his party. I explained to him how my plans to pick up my wife had been placed on hold when the Gaon Bura of Sangti village, near Dirang, told me that the expedition was looking for porters and for people with horses to carry loads.

'You don't need to carry loads any longer', said Major Khathing to me. 'You are now going to be my spy.'

Pema Gombu had used the Tibetan judicial system to gain redressal for crimes against his family—thereby demonstrating the effective control that Tibetan administration had over Tawang—but like many people from the local Monpa tribe, he did not see the Tibetans as being one with the Monpas. He says: 'In Lhasa, it was clear to me that the Tibetans looked down upon Monpas, called us *Ghrinda*. They saw themselves as rulers and the Monpas as subordinate subjects' (Gombu 2008).

So it was natural that Pema Gombu became one of the key persons that Khathing used to establish Indian administrative control over Tawang.

As the cavalcade inched up into the valley of Tawang, Khathing rode on a horse with a trail of yaks and horses carrying several days' supply of food and ammunition. The troops, the locals and the animals all moved along at a stately pace. It had taken three night halts and days for Khathing, the first Indian official, to make his way to

⁶ Political Interpreters or PIs were advisors-cum-interpreters to administrators from the British rule on. They were identified by their official red coats and were amongst the most influential positions in those early days.

Tawang since Independence, but there was hardly any trepidation, only a healthy curiosity in the area he came to claim. Along the way, on several occasions, Major Khathing would point to various landmarks—villages, mountains and streams—and ask Pema Gombu to identify them.

‘*Voh gaon kaun sa hai?*’ (Which village is that?)

‘Mukto, Sir.’

‘*Voh pahar kaun sa hai?*’ (Which mountain is that?)

And so the expedition moved on. (Gombu 2008)

As Khathing crossed Se La, the mountain pass, the locals greeted his convoy with much curiosity but also some trepidation. The trepidation came from the fear that any change or tension among authorities could make the lives of locals harder.

THE LOCALS' IMPRESSIONS

Sang Wangchu, who later became the GB of Lhoudung, a village on the slopes of the Tawang valley was about 14 years old when Khathing came along the road past his village. There are not too many survivors from the time but Sang Wangchu has a vivid account of the expedition and the impression that Khathing made on the locals.

I remember when Major Khathing came in 1951. I was about 14–15 years old. The British came earlier. I was a baby and have no memory of the British arrival, but our elders do remember.

The British came in full uniform, in a straight line. No horses for riding, only for loads. Everyone walked, even the officers. They used to carry long telescopes. We had no idea of their language, but they used to present us with sewing needles. They didn't stay very long either, barely a week. They went up to Bum La border, touched the border and then returned.

When Major Khathing came, I don't know what he talked about with the Tibetan Dzongpons. There were Assam Rifles troops with him, but not a large number.

We all knew in advance that Major Khathing was coming. The village elders all told us. Urgen's father⁷ had gone to bring him to Tawang. Our village turned out to receive him. There is a local tradition to welcome honoured visitors with boiled

⁷ Urgen's father is the same Pema Gombu who has been quoted earlier. He assisted Khathing's party in their march into Tawang.

local eggs. A *boitan* (thick carpet) was spread, and a *maksho maktan* (decorated carpet) was spread out on top of it. The *jah* (tea) and *khalum tsogo* (boiled eggs) and *yeh bo* (popcorn)... *yeh khyan* (hard corn) was put on a low wooden table called a *teb*. All this was laid out for Khathing.

We did all that for Major Khathing because the GB was himself coming with Khathing and this was his village. So we had to receive him in style. They were coming from Jang, it must have taken them about a couple of hours to get here. He reached about nine in the morning, as we could tell from the sun.

There was a fair crowd, all the prominent leaders of the village had turned out to receive him. I was also watching from alongside the road as he was being greeted with all this fanfare.

I was wondering what was happening. One the one hand, there is a Tibetan government here in Tawang. All of us felt that we were Tibetans. We never for a moment imagined that India's government would rule here some day. Now, another group of people were coming and my leaders were coming out to greet them. I was confused.

There was a subconscious worry amongst many elders in the village too that the Indians who were coming would leave and then the anger of the Tibetans would be visited upon us. After all, the British had come and gone too. We were hearing all these rumours and discussions.

Major Khathing himself cut an impressive figure. He was tall,⁸ strong, handsome and he was talking to everyone, calling people up to him and talking to them, especially when he wanted information. He was talking to GB Pema Gombu and through him, talking to other people.

He did not stay in our village for more than an hour, before setting off for Tawang. Later, after maybe about three years, the Tibetans had departed from Tawang but the rumours persisted. Rumours swirled that the Tibetans had left for now because of Khathing's arrival, but Khathing would leave Tawang someday and the Tibetans would return to punish us for supporting him.

But Khathing tried very hard to remove this fear from people's hearts. He would call local elders to Tawang, treat them well and give them parties. He very effectively used the elders as local messengers to reassure the people and to tell them to be calm. (Wangchu 2009)

Tashi Khandu, a former MLA who now lives in Kitpi village, recalls Khathing's arrival in Tawang (Khandu 2008):

⁸ Khathing's daughter, Bela, says in actual fact her father was no more than 5 feet 4 inches in height.

When India became independent, we didn't get the news. There was no newspaper, no radio, we don't know when we got to know. When Major Khathing came, a lot of people went to Tawang to see him. The offices were pitched up in a kind of tented camp and everyone used to crowd around.

KHATHING'S REPORT

Khathing noted local apprehension about whether India was here for the long haul in the report that he sent Nari Rustomji after his arrival in Tawang. He reported that the local people were 'quite happy' about the end of Tibetan control, and that they were flocking to the camp for 'our Darshan'. But the locals'

only apprehension is that we may leave the area again as was done in Capt. Lightfoot's time. It appears to me that after the departure of Capt. Lightfoot's party from this area, some of the leaders who helped the party were taken to tasks (sic) by the Dzungpons and the local people seem afraid lest such a thing will occur again. (Chakravarty 1953: File CGA 6 of 1951, Part 1, 14).

The real test of Khathing's political skills came, not from the local people, but in his dealings with the Tibetans who had to be evicted from their positions of power and wealth. Khathing perceptively saw the distinction between the monastic and non-monastic tributes the Tibetans were exacting. He was most reassuring to the monastery officials and monks, who were concerned that he may stop monastery tributes, which the devout local populace were contented to pay. But he was ruthless in ending taxes levied by the Tibetan government. In a telegram to Rustomji, Khathing said: 'As regards the lay officials, like Tsona Dzungpons and Drekhangs, the salt monopolists and grain collectors, I have not allowed them to exercise any of their powers and influence with effect from the 9 February, 1951' (Chakravarty 1953: File CGA 6 of 1951, Part 1, 14), that is, within three days of his arrival in Tawang.

Khathing handled the inevitable Tibetan backlash with tact as well as firmness. The Tibetan officials argued that they should be allowed to exercise their powers till they received further instructions from Lhasa through the courier they had sent on 7 February 1951. Khathing's response was a simple 'No', since the area had been ceded to India in the treaty of 1914. Khathing threatened them with 'drastic action' but also continued to look after their 'personal comforts' so that they would not report to their government 'any ill-treatment by an India Government representative'.

If the mission was an unalloyed success (Chakravarty 1953: File CGA 6 of 1951, Part 1, 21)⁹ there were two reasons for it. One was the person chosen to lead the mission.

⁹ In his DO No. CGA 6/31, dated 3 April 1951, from Shillong, the Adviser to the Governor of Assam informed the Government of India that 'From all indications, the expedition has been entirely successful and very good relations exist so far subsist between our men and the local people....'

Another was the clear-sighted tactics adopted for establishing Indian administrative structures. Khathing and his team immediately began winning the trust of the local people by arranging airdrops for material to repair the Tawang monastery and for those affected by the earthquake. Tawang was not among the worst hit by the 1950 earthquake,¹⁰ but that did not prevent Khathing from using the earthquake relief fund to create a favourable impression of the newly arrived Indian administration.

'I can never forget the 1950 earthquake. The after effects were still evident when Khathing came. He went around distributing rations, clothing, medicines' (Gombu 2008). Other materials like *gur* (jaggery) and salt, that were thus far being brought in from Tibet, were also arranged to be airdropped. The innovation of the Indian administration was evident as the governor's earthquake relief fund was used liberally to expedite the setting up of the administration rather than wait for clearances (Khathing 1951a). The team was also sensitive to the sentiments of the people and worked hard to make sure that it did not make the same mistakes as the Tibetan officials, such as, using the locals for forced labour to transport materials, without paying them. In fact, Rustomji wrote,

Our intention is to set up a permanent administrative centre at Tawang backed up by the officers of the Education, Medical and Agricultural Departments. Much will depend, of course, on the fate of the Border Committee's recommendations. (Chakravarty 1953: File CGA 6 of 1951, Part 1, 21)

Himself a Tangkhul Naga, Khathing knew the effect that an airdrop would have on the remote mountain people who would be seeing such a demonstration of power for the first time in their lives—Tawang had never seen airplanes before—and the advantage that this would give him over the former Tibetan administrators of Tawang. And so Khathing staged a spectacle...the airdrops also had the effect of impressing on the local population the might of the Indian government (Khathing 1951a). As the British administration had moved up to Rupa and Dirang Dzong in 1944, they had carried out airdrops there but it did not go across the Se La to Tawang.

The success of the 1951 Tawang expedition can also, in no small measure, be attributed to the acumen of its leader, Major Khathing. Government files do not say why he was chosen for the task but those who worked with him in his earliest years in service say his service record speaks for itself.¹¹ Khathing was an instant success with the people:

¹⁰ For a description of how the eastern part of NEFA actually bore the brunt of the earthquake, see Kingdon-Ward (1990: 236–40).

¹¹ Khathing was born into a Tangkhul Naga family in February 1912 in Ukhrul, Manipur. He was commissioned into the army, into the 19th Hyderabad regiment, before he had turned 20, early in 1942. He served in the Victory-Force in 1943–44 on deputation as a volunteer in the resistance against the Japanese. These were irregulars operating in Manipur and parts of Nagaland behind enemy lines. Khathing took part in the Battle of Shangshak, receiving an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) and a Military Cross. In 1947, India became independent and his run of triumphs continued. Khathing was elected

His attitude was really good. He was very convivial. He would sit with the villagers and watch dances. Rum would be there in a jerrican, which he would bring along with him. The GBs and prominent citizens would party with him. The custom here is for a yak to be cut. Khathing would pay for the yak meat. He was very generous and had great respect for Gaon Buras. I've never met any man like him. He brought such a change in Tawang that it was like heaven and earth. (Gombu 2008)

Given the remoteness of Tawang, the Indian government moved uncharacteristically fast in providing the area with the basics of administration. A permanent site for the Administrative Headquarters and the Assam Rifles Post was selected. A civil dispensary with 12 beds was also established. Check-posts were opened on all main trade routes. House counting of all villages south of the McMahon Line began and GBs were appointed. By August 1951, Indian administration was finally in effective control of all of Tawang.

CONCLUSION

The successful entry into Tawang set in motion a broader process in New Delhi and Shillong to consolidate and administer NEFA. A new cadre of officers was created, called the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS) in 1953. The work of the officers was rooted in the study of Elwin, who conceptualised the Indian strategy in *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1957), which went on to become the bible for early Indian administrators in the area.

In the course of interviews, and the study of letters and diaries of administrators and government files, it is evident that practitioners and policy makers like Jawaharlal Nehru, Nari Rustomji, Verrier Elwin, K.L. Mehta, T.N. Kaul along with cadres working at the local level were in constant correspondence over the most sensitive way to integrate the population. Nehru understood that this Frontier was not necessarily India (Elwin n.d.), but he understood that it could be made so. This policy was informally known as hastening slowly (Rustomji 1983: 128). It was implemented to retain the local culture and practices to the extent that the entry of missionaries was not allowed

to the assembly in Manipur, the first in India to be elected on the basis of total adult franchise in 1948 (Ali 2009). But Khathing was no politician, and in May 1950, Major Khathing joined the 2nd Assam Rifles as an Assistant Commandant at Sadiya. On 15 August 1950, while leading a special reconnaissance patrol to the border near Rima, his team was at Minzong staging camp beyond Chingwinti outpost of Assam Rifles, when one of the biggest earthquakes recorded in history occurred in NEFA and Assam. Khathing emerged from the quake practically unscathed and was selected to lead the Tawang mission. His journey started from Charduar, Assam, on 17 January 1951 and he reached Tawang on 6 February 1951. In the District Commissioner's office in Tawang, 6 February 1951 is recorded as the date when Khathing, the first Assistant Political Officer, set up regular Indian administration in Tawang (Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Tawang 1986).

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into NEFA, and even people from the rest of India who wanted to travel to NEFA needed special permits to enter so that an overwhelming presence of outsiders would not inhibit local customs.

The IFAS officers were specially trained to work with the tribes in a manner such that they would introduce the benefits of health and education to the locals without infringing on their basic values. The Indian government introduced the study of Hindi as a first language in NEFA to hasten integration. This was a tactful infliction that did not invite protest because none of the local dialects had a written script. This policy was implemented successfully through the 1950s.

The reason why it is important to include voices of the locals from the border areas is to illustrate how local narrative often complicates the national narrative. At the local level Major Khathing's entry into Tawang was greeted with enthusiasm at being relieved from paying usurious taxes to the Tibetan administrators. The new Indian administration too was accepted. But at the national level, the discourse was turning as tensions with China were creating strategic pressures that dictated a more elaborate and complex administrative and military structure in the heart of the tribal areas. This interrupted the actual implementation of the policy in its original form, but clearly the years of sensitive handling of the border areas had left a lasting impact, such that these people saw themselves as Indians even as India was losing the war with China in 1962. It seems appropriate to close with the words of a local, Tashi Khandu, who said that as the Chinese came through his village in 1962 which had been deserted by Indian administrators and soldiers, 'I did not ever hesitate to tell them that the Indian government had done good work here' (Khandu 2008).

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