
Book Review

‘A question left over by history. . .’

by Susan Maitra

Aksaichin and Sino-Indian Conflict

by John Lall

Allied Publishers Private, Ltd., New Delhi, 1989

Rs. 150.00 hardbound, 356 pages with index and maps

For anyone who wishes to get a grip on the essentials of the seemingly intractable dispute that has kept relations between India and China frozen in suspicion and hostility for 26 years, this book is must reading. Though eminently accessible to the layman, its authority and incisiveness make this book a prime candidate for required reading in the relevant university courses and for purchase by libraries everywhere.

The author has succeeded in putting into focus a great sweep of geopolitical history in the remote Himalayan ranges—from the early efforts of the British to engage the Manchu dynasty as a buffer and ally against imperial Russia’s southward march in the Pamir mountains of the northwestern Himalayan range, to the creation of the so-called McMahon Line border between India and China in the southeastern Himalayas, down to the 1962 conflict.

The book is packed with details of the historical record gleaned from British and Indian archives as well as communications with still-living actors in the drama, yet it never weighs as a pedantic tract. Instead, the reader is carried along on a fascinating journey through difficult terrain, as a novice in the hand of a mountain guide is led from outlook to outlook suddenly finding himself at the summit, with a commanding view. The analogy is to the point.

John Lall is uniquely qualified to speak on the Sino-Indian border dispute. “In one way or other the Himalayas have been an obsession with me all my life, the form changing with occupation and the passing years,” he writes in the preface. An enthusiastic trekker for starters, Lall studied history in India and England before joining the Indian Civil

Service. As the first Dewan (prime minister) of Sikkim from 1949 to 1954, he saw the “liberation” of Tibet from close quarters. Subsequent service in the defense ministry from 1958 through 1963 spanned the deterioration of relations between India and China, the war, as well as India’s effort to “learn lessons,” as he puts it, from the debacle.

It is his view that the 1962 war should never have taken place. In unraveling the origin and evolution of the border dispute that was its immediate cause, he not only shows why this is so but brings to light the bases for its resolution today. The book is most timely, and gives a critical insight into the meaning of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s recent steps to move the India-China relationship forward.

A barren patch of land

Aksaichin, the “White Chinese desert,” is a piece of uninhabited territory, at an elevation of 15-17,500 feet between Ladakh and Tibetan Changthang in the plains defined by the Karakoram and Kuenlen mountain ranges. It contains not a trace of human civilization, and was once described by Jawaharlal Nehru as a “no man’s land” where not a blade of grass grows. This piece of real estate is at the heart of the Sino-Indian conflict.

In 1865, a junior British survey officer was persuaded by the Wazir of Ladakh—presumably at the behest of his ambitious Dogra master, the Maharaja Ranbir Singh of Kashmir—to survey the area and mark it out as part of the Dogra dynasty’s Ladakh territory. The Maharaja’s interest was commercial: the western end of this inhospitable tract contained three alternative trading routes to the main one through the Karakoram Pass, linking Tibet with Sinkiang. And since the Chinese were temporarily out of power in Sinkiang, it was an opportune time to stake the claim.

Though the British nominally disowned the errant surveyor, his hurriedly sketched map of 1865 became the foundation for subsequent Survey of India maps, even though no surveyors before or after agreed with the lines. At first the British sat tight. As long as the Russians, whose agent Grombchevsky was active in the Pamirs on behalf of Russia’s forward policy, didn’t grab the territory, they did not mind.

But when China returned to Sinkiang and Britain wanted to firm up the alliance against Russia, the inaccurate map was dispensed with. The Dogra’s claims were repudiated in an 1899 proposal made to China by Britain, in which Aksaichin was divided between India and China along the Lakhsang mountain range that cuts it in half. There is thus scant justification for the government of independent India to have revived the 1865 claim, as it did.

Middle Kingdom mandarins

If India clung to arbitrary survey maps, the Chinese attitude to the border problems was no less dubious. From the outset, British negotiating efforts were met with Chinese assertions that “the traditional boundaries are well known,”

and zero cooperation in even discussing, much less jointly surveying, mapping or otherwise determining just where the boundary lay.

The Simla Conference of 1913-14 in which Britain, Tibet, and China participated, resulted in the so-called McMahon line as the boundary in the eastern sector, but this was never ratified by China. In later rounds with India, Lall points out, the Chinese presented virtually no evidence, relying instead on the *non sequitur* that since India had not proved its case, China was right.

It was China that in a government note of 1962, stated: "The Sino-Indian question is a question left over by history." But history did not stop with the 1954 agreement on Tibet, or even the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959. As Lall puts it, "The main actors of the time were living with as well as creating the Sino-Indian problem as it evolved."

The book does not attempt to account for or evaluate Chinese motives in depth in the run-up to the 1962 war, but does make clear they conducted themselves on the basis of a well-laid military plan. As Lall comments on the 19th-century observation of a British official that China was a "most impractical nation," this may have been true when it came to getting them to come to grips with problems of international relations in a Western way, but it could not be taken to mean the Chinese didn't know what they wanted.

The actions and acts of omission on the Indian side that offered the chance for miscalculation by Beijing, are presented in detail. There is the spectacle of Nehru, cornered politically on the border issue, telling the military to hold their fire and then delivering bombastic speeches on "not giving an inch," secure in his belief that China would not resort to force. There is the irony of Defense Minister Krishna Menon, the loudest champion of the Indian army's "forward policy," whose suspicion of his own military was not even barely concealed, and who later revealed that he did not think India's intransigence on Aksaichin was valid.

In the end, the war settled nothing. China seized what it wanted in the northwest without India's abandoning its claims, and withdrew from territory it overran in the northeast without giving up its claim to that turf. That is the "status quo" today. Contrary to one common line of thought, Lall does not believe this status quo is the basis for a settlement. What he has shown in combing the history of the efforts to define the Sino-Indian boundary, is that there is the basis for a settlement in both the northwest and east in terms of both tradition and natural features, mainly watersheds—provided the commitment to joint determination, is serious.

The fact is that beneath the overlay of what Lall calls "imperial imposition" by Britain and China over the years, a traditional process of social interchange together with the area's sharp physical features exists, that is the basis for defining a border that is, as Lall insists it must be, more than "a line on the ground where both sides confront each other eyeball to eyeball."

Books Received

Anti-submarine Warfare and Superpower Strategic Stability, by Donald C. Daniel, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, Ill., 1986, \$32.50 hardbound, 222pp.

Kelly: More Than My Share of It All, by Clarence L. "Kelly" Johnson, with Maggie Smith, Smithsonian Institute Press, Washington, D.C., 1985, \$17.50 hardbound, 209pp.

Printers and Press Freedom: The Ideology of Early American Journalism, by Jeffrey A. Smith, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, \$24.95 hardbound, 233pp.

The Bogman and the Archaeology of People, by Don Brothwell, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, \$9.95 paper, 128pp.

Klaus Fuchs: Atom Spy, by Robert Chadwell Williams, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, \$25.00 hardbound, 267pp.

Space Resources: Breaking The Bonds of Earth, by John S. Lewis and Ruth A. Lewis, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, \$30.00, 418pp.

The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun, by Merrill D. Peterson, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, \$27.95 hardbound, 573pp.

The Great Scientists: The Story of Science Told Through The Lives of Twelve Landmark Figures, by Jack Meadows, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, \$35.00 hardbound, 256pp.

The Secret Country, by Frank O'Neill, Crown Publishers, New York, 1987, \$17.95 hardbound, 357pp.

Menzies and Churchill at War: A Controversial New Account of the 1941 Struggle For Power, by David Day, Paragon House Publishers, New York, 1988, \$18.95 hardbound, 271pp.

Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa: The Story Behind the Fight For Angola, by Fred Bridgland, Paragon House, New York, 1986, \$21.95 hardbound, 512pp.

Mexican Politics in Transition, edited by Judith Gentlemen, Westview Special Studies on Latin America and the Caribbean, Westview Press, 1987, \$34.95 hardbound, 320pp.

The Sixth Continent: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, by Mark Frankland, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1987, \$22.95 hardbound, 292pp.