

Bordering the Eastern Himalaya: Boundaries, Passes, Power Contestations

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Abstract:

National borders in the eastern Himalaya region exhibit pressures of modernisation transition between two powerful emerging nation-states. The research question concerns under what circumstances borders are maintained. Consideration falls on the role of physical features, borders as cultural identity markers, and passes as transgressive spaces, negotiated through historical shifts in population and politics. A geopolitical history of boundary contestations in this region indicates the role of passes as conduits of political and cultural flows. Power relations bound space that cultural preservation makes worth delimiting.

Keywords: Himalayan region | emerging nation-states | international borders | cultural identity | geopolitics | geography | boundary contestation

Article:

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with a magnificent frontier.

We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India. 1

Nation-states located along the Himalayan watershed between India and China face interrelated threats to their cultural, environmental, economic and political integrity. This study examines borders in the eastern Himalaya, highlighting cartographic changes as evidence of shifts in power extension and cultural contestation. Flat political lines and topographic shading show up clearly on a map; a fuller political geography considers the less visible dynamic alignments of culture (e.g., religion, language, ethnicity, customs), historical consequences of invasions and

domination, and economic forces at work that are indispensable for understanding regional alignments.

Borders are shaped by political considerations that in some cases transgress and in other cases preserve political identity ties of ‘us’ and ‘them’. These distinctions are defined largely by cultural affinity, used in the anthropological sense as a set of shared values and practices that distinguish a group. State political power is often employed in an attempt to create a national culture. A particular focus of this research falls on the country of Bhutan, which codified state-related cultural practices in visibly distinct dress, architecture, language and behaviour regulations known as “One Nation, One People” at the outset of the Sixth Five Year Plan in January 1989. Later sections of this paper show how such distinctions, carried by migrants from other areas, have significant political ramifications as people are excluded, included or overwhelm bordering political areas, causing ongoing international tensions.

The goal of this study is to illustrate how borders matter as politically potent cultural identifiers by tracing the historical evolution and continuing contestation around current borders, considering the permeability and penetration points of even as formidable a barrier as the Himalayas. In a region ringed by these heights, numerous pressures on strategically important boundaries include the desire to retain lowland areas for agricultural and military access, along with passes through high mountain areas (Figure 1). As the opening quote by India's founding Prime Minister Nehru suggests, the physical boundary is perceived as the furthest extension of a strategic political interest by parties on both sides of it. By way of categorisation, the term “nation-state” is used for a larger scale political entity than a “state”, except for quoted references preserving its use in the source. The case of Sikkim even illustrates a sliding down this scale, from an independent nation-state to a state within India.

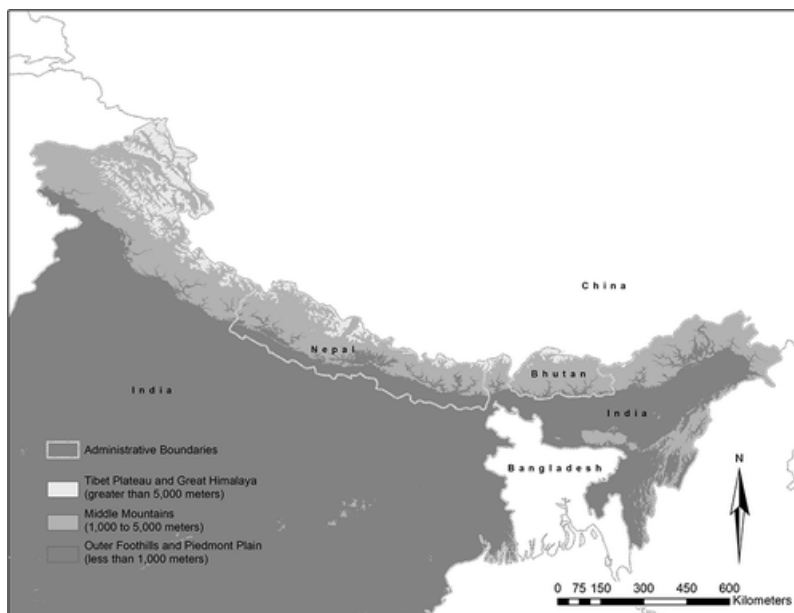


FIGURE 1 Landscape regions in the Himalaya.

The following study of an under-examined region of the world demonstrates the multiple issues involved in border demarcations, primarily over the last sixty years of political change. Although Lord Curzon at the turn of the twentieth century famously likened frontiers to a “razor's edge” tripwire separating war/peace and life/death of nation-states, one hundred years later the spectre of nuclear engagement leads to boundary blurring and nudged readjustment. Such shifts in international boundaries reflect outcomes of global geopolitics as they play out on the ground, relocating people along cartographic contours. ² Borders in the eastern Himalaya indicate demarcation lines at the far edges of a multinational power struggle. As mountain ranges resulted from the physical collision between the Indian and East Asian tectonic plates, so this region is politically re-shaped by the ongoing contest between the continental powers of India and China. Like the conflicting geologic forces underneath them, China proclaims it is a “peaceful rising” continental power while it joins India in exerting relentless pressure on their contingent neighbours and closely monitoring alignments. The entities at their interstices sometimes subside under such forces, as illustrated in the following case studies.

Consideration falls on three particular aspects of borders, negotiated through shifts in population and politics: enduring physical features such as passes, evolved historical-cultural boundaries, and the shifting political borders that map them. First, physical features set off distinct areas in this region; passes function as transgressive spaces through which elements intrude that can be significantly different from those prevailing within the boundaries entered. This section spotlights the political pivot points of strategic passes in Sikkim, Bhutan and the Chumbi Valley of Tibet, which constitute a long-standing arena for the power play between those controlling the Indian and Chinese land masses (Figure 2). These passes serve as strategic mountain chokepoints critical in global power competition, analogous to Mahan's assertion of the importance of control of waterway straits. ³ In this case control involves headwaters of major Asian rivers that can serve as hydropower sources. Political forces that manage and impact access to strategic riverine regions are particularly important and understudied as they relate to developing countries on the periphery of major population centres and global attention.

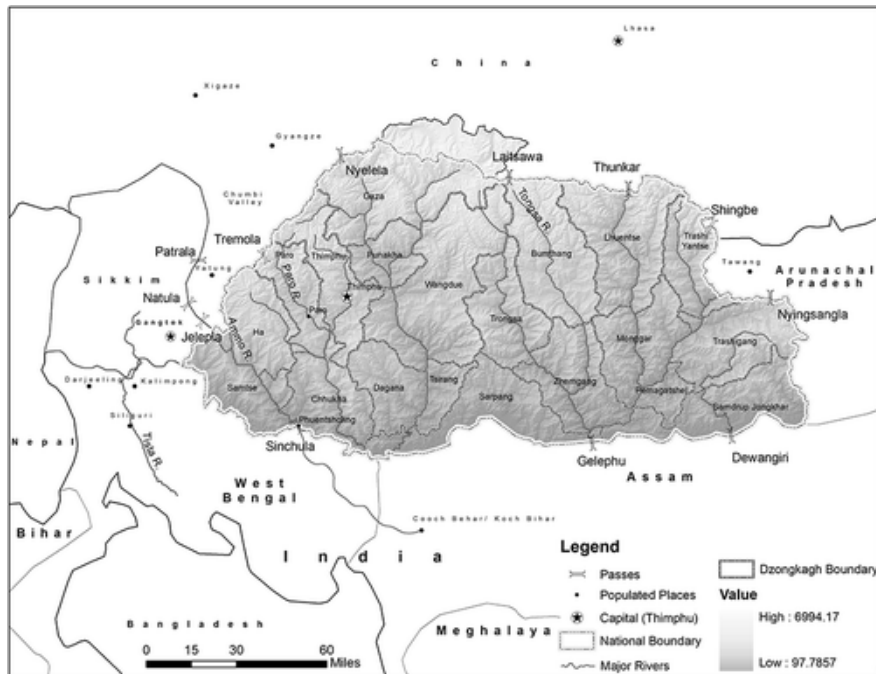


FIGURE 2 Political boundaries, major passes, rivers and urban areas in Bhutan and surrounding region.

The historical narrative in the second section explains the evolution of regional configurations as political-cultural alliances, while the third section traces their contemporary outcomes. The discussion of whether political or cultural considerations form the primary determinant for national affiliation is inconclusive. In the case of Bhutan, both culturally distinct ethnic Nepalis and culturally similar Tibetans were given the choice of citizenship or expulsion in the 1990s, but the onus of proof fell more heavily on the former. 4 From its cultural hearth in India the Vajrayana Buddhism practiced in Tibet, Bhutan, and by the former dominant group in Sikkim maintains its politically protected status only in Bhutan, which acknowledges heritage links with bordering countries and conceives of its boundaries as classically encompassing a culturally cohesive entity. 5 Bhutanese liken their situation to “a yam between two boulders”, referring both to the historic squeeze between Tibet and British India as well as the contemporary tug of interests between China and India. 6 Borders still matter.

Theoretical Framework

Categorisation of borders largely falls into two camps: an older approach that focused on the role of geographic features in defining and maintaining borders, 7 and another that prioritises the examination of borders' functions and their formation processes. 8 An updated extension of the latter approach considers the concrete surface political lines as a manifestation of dynamic forces underlying socio-cultural processes. 9 This study looks at borderlands in the eastern Himalaya as spaces controlled by nation-states whose boundaries demonstrate the shifting demarcations of power contestations and the politics of identity that seek to preserve distinctiveness. These can

be codified as in the “One Nation, One People” proclamation, or seen in attempts of various rebel groups such as the Assamese and Gurkha to carve out autonomous territories. This study illustrates the important fluidity of borders along with the constant assertion that they are being regularised to reflect a container of permanent, cognitively distinct categories. 10

Culture is not co-terminus with political borders even in this physically segmented region, but boundaries serve to define regions of historically concentrated cultures that are later re-aligned as counter-affiliated frontier zones. Regional examples are China's Buddhist Tibet versus India's Buddhist Sikkim (overwhelmed by Hindu Nepali migrants just prior to its absorption into India) and independent Buddhist Bhutan. Forms of culturally based allegiance signifiers to the political system can include language and clothing as well as a value system, if not the religion(s) at their root. Passes act as transboundary permeations. Places where people flow in to subvert or support politically relevant cultural practices are also of interest, since they can be controlled and flows cut off, encouraged, or re-directed depending on the political will of the entities on either side of them. 11

Changes in boundary lines reflect the type of nation-states that they touch: militarily strong and aggressive, or passive defensive. Borders are produced by varying pressures at different points, some flexibly adjusted and others hotly preserved, responding to demographic, political-economic, military, and cultural considerations. Borders function as physical and political boundaries that reflect the multiple natures of the dynamic socio-spatial entities that they contain and separate. At present several areas of the eastern Himalaya borders are under negotiation, while passes are also correspondingly creaking open in a controlled, tentative and wary manner. The accompanying trepidation acknowledges concern over the fragility of the situation in flux, affecting societies with unwanted but begrudgingly necessary openness due to economic globalisation and military pressures. While the physical line of the Himalayan massif and valleys between ridges remain clear border demarcations, slippage occurs as a border on Bhutan's northwestern frontier recently slid from the top of a range to the southern foothills, acknowledging China's infrastructure penetration and diplomatic demands. The form of the border followed the function of hegemonic power flexing, with joint Indo-Bhutanese scattered border patrols unequal to the task of covering a vast region populated largely by Tibetan-related ethnic herders. Borders remain important as containers of culture, while both culture and land cover shrink in the Buddhist homelands of Tibet and Nepal.

The next section of this discussion notes the physical features and major passes involved in the movement of people, culture, and economic links in this part of the Himalaya. The third section highlights historical events that determined political dominance in the region from the pre-colonial period through independence, re-consolidating areas of influence and attempting to preserve the cultural integrity of buffer entities. The use of current names for political entities (e.g., India, Tibet) in reference to historical events involving differently configured boundaries should be understood as referring to populations who belonged to areas in this region distinguished, for example, by linguistic groups or the control of a particular ruler. These areas in

most cases became part of the modern political entity with which they are identified. The third section considers the political-economic implications of the current situation. The conclusion summarises implications for theory in light of the ongoing contest for the control of borders caught in dynamic cross-currents of politics, economics and culture shifting boundaries to reflect new configurations.

PHYSICAL FEATURES, TRANSGRESSIVE PASSES

The dominant physical factor in this region is the towering Himalayan mountain range, created by the ancient physical collision of two tectonic plates that joined mainland Asia and the Indian subcontinent. High passes, often formed by river flows, provide infrequent and therefore strategically important transportation access routes (Table 1). The passes of Jelupla and Natula (“la” means “pass”, and is customarily included in the proper name) on the Chumbi Valley's western border are of particular significance, along with several more northern remote openings. China currently controls Tibet's Chumbi Valley, a wedge-shaped extrusion of land between Sikkim (now absorbed into India) and the independent but Indian-aligned parliamentary monarchy of Bhutan. Nepal, with its recently democratically deposed monarchy, communist insurgents, and restive migratory Hindu majority population, lies on the western border of the former Sikkim. Attention to the geographical importance of borders falls on 1) the Chumbi Valley of Tibet intervening between Bhutan and India's Sikkim province, 2) the Siliguri corridor (or “chicken neck”) running through West Bengal province between Nepal and Bangladesh through eastern Sikkim, and 3) the Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh (formerly the Northeastern Frontier Area, or NEFA) bordering eastern Bhutan.

TABLE 1 Strategic Passes

Pass	Connection	Direction	Internal	Height
Sikkim	Tibet – Chumbi Valley			
Jelepla	Chumbi Valley	East		14,390
Natula	Yatung	East		14,200
Patrala	Chumbi Valley	East		14,240
Bhutan				
Tremola	Pari (CV) – Paro (B)	West		15,000
Lingshi	Punakha (B) – Shigatse (T)	West		
Laitsawa	Bumthang (B) – Lhasa (T)	North		
Thunkar	Lhasa (T)	East	Rudenla	12,600

Pass	Connection	Direction	Internal	Height
Shingbe	Dozam Valley	Tashigang (B) – Tibet East	Pelela	11,055
Sinchula	Phuentsholing (B) – W. Bengal (I)	Southwest	5,700	
Gelephu	Assam (I) via Tongsa and Dangmei R.	South		
Dewangiri	Assam (I), Duar Plain	Southeast		
Nyingsangla	Arunachal Pradesh/Tawang	East		

Human settlement on the southern side of the Himalayan massif largely occurred in the few economically sustainable pockets of a very challenging environment. Migrants came from either Tibet, moving south via a very small number of relatively low passes (note northern and western borders of Bhutan in Figure 2), or Nepali-Indian areas, spreading out from relatively densely settled sites further south or west. Most inhabitants practiced herding, given the marginal quality of the steep land available for agriculture, as do the migratory nomads in the higher reaches of this region today. The technique of attempting to extend political-military power along the footpaths of wandering nomads and their flocks remains popular among aspiring Chinese occupiers. Passes through the Chumbi valley featured most prominently in the history of this region. Two rivers – Sikkim's Tista and western Bhutan's Ammo Chu (“chu” meaning “river” in Dzongka) – served as major trade routes. 12 Sikkim's capital city of Gangtok lies on an historic trade route to Tibet via the Natula pass, running south to Rangpo, Kalimpong and Siliguri, the Indian base in the plains.

Sikkim's earliest known inhabitants of Indian ancestry are called the Lepchas; the predominantly Buddhist group of Tibetan ancestry are the Bhotias, known as Ngalops in Bhutan. While this group settled largely in the western area of Bhutan closest to Sikkim and the northern region close to Tibet, the other two major demographic entities in Bhutan are the Sharchops (the oldest residents, largely in the eastern part of the country) and the Lhotshampa, the most recent immigrants whose Hindu ethnicity is closer to that of India and Nepal. Reasons for the Himalayan aligned physical and political fissure between Chinese-occupied Tibet on the mountain ranges' heights and Tibet's cultural cousins but India-aligned political entities of Sikkim and Bhutan on the mountains' southern flanks are the subject of the next section.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND POWER POLITICS

Using historic examples, this study illustrates the importance of considering the geopolitical role of borders as containers (albeit permeable at puncture points) for dynamic human processes at work defining the nation-states they inhabit. Bhutan serves as the primary focus for this examination due to its active attempts to use its border as a survival mechanism, seeking to

preserve its unique culture by practicing the “politics of identity” to contain basically only those who share it 13

Chinese maps indicate that China considered Sikkim and Bhutan as part of Tibet since the second century based on cultural affinity, a claim strengthened by China's own incorporation into the Mongol-controlled Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 AD). 14 Buddhist religious influences, originating in what is now part of southern Nepal, flowed from both India and Tibet and came to include the Mongols. Physically, the boundary between northern Bhutan and Tibet generally ran along the ridge line of the Himalayan heights separating the two entities. Since its consolidation of control over Tibet in 1959, China occasionally challenges the traditional watershed line of demarcation in various ways, from issuing new maps that encompass disputed territory to extending roads and promoting incursions by nomad herders accompanied by Chinese troops, 15 dealt with in greater detail in Table 2 and the following chronology.

TABLE 2 Chronology of Major Events Through Passes

Date	Event
Early 800s	Early monarchies, Tibetan Buddhist culture established
1000–1600	Tibetan invasions, repulsed
Circa 1700	Bhutan, then Tibet, invade Sikkim
1770	Nepal, Bhutan and Cooch Behar (India) invade Sikkim
1774	Treaty of Cooch Behar: British India controls lowland Himalayan trade
1835	Sikkim loses Darjeeling
1865	Treaty of Sinchula ends Duar War; Bhutan loses plains to British India
1890s	Sikkim loses Chumbi Valley to India, eastern land to Bhutan
1895	Pamir Boundary Commission sets India borders in relation to watersheds
1903	Younghusband invades Tibet through Chumbi Valley, Bhutan
1907	Ugyen Wangchuk sides with British India vs. Tibet, establishes monarchy
1910	China invades Tibet; Britain-Bhutan Treaty of Punakha
1913–1914	Simla Conference: British Indian “Dawang Salient” east of Bhutan
1949	China invades Tibet; India-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship as “protectorate”

1950	Sikkim protectorate of India; Indo-Nepali “Treaty of Peace & Friendship”
1954	Tibetan uprising; Chinese maps diminishing Bhutan
1958	Nehrus to Bhutan via Chumbi Valley; Chinese maps diminish Bhutan
1959	Dalai Lama to India; Bhutan-India Border Roads Organization
1960	Bhutan closes border to Tibet due to China takeover
1961	Chinese maps of Bhutan more moderate; India aids Bhutan, First Five Year Plan
1962	Sino-Indian war in Himalayan region involves Bhutan border incursions
1967	Second Sino-Indian War, Sikkim's Natula Pass
1973–1974	Nepali riots in Sikkim lead to absorption into India
1984	First (India-sanctioned) Sino-Bhutanese talks over border incursions
1989	Indian embargo over Nepali goods to protest Chinese contacts
2006	Final establishment of India-Bhutan border

Conflicts between Tibet and Bhutan occurred in the early 1600s, followed by invasions of Sikkim by Bhutanese forces in 1680 and 1700 and an incursion from Tibet in 1714. In 1770, Nepal nibbled off a part of Sikkim west of the Tista River and India's Cooch Behar principality joined Bhutan for an invasion of Sikkim. Two years later Great Britain, in the interest of its Indian colony, invaded Bhutan, leading to the Treaty of Cooch Behar in 1774 whereby India reclaimed its control over the lowland. The significance of these conflicts, with British interests represented by the East India Company, lay precisely with the multi-nation recognition of the Nepal-Sikkim-Bhutan-princely Indian state's strategic location in relation to trade across and through the Himalayas. Sikkim lost the hill station of Darjeeling in 1835 and the Chumbi Valley in the late 1890s to British India, as well as land in the east to Bhutan. 16

Ensuing intermittent boundary disputes led to the 1864–1865 Duar War, swiftly concluded by the loss of 3,000 square miles of Bhutan's subtropical plains to British India in the Treaty of Sinchula. The word “duar” means “passes”, which in the case of the Assam-Bengal-Bhutanese lowlands varied from ten to twelve miles and afforded easy access to the plains spreading south at the abruptly rising highland region characterising the rest of Bhutan. Only Nepal remains large enough to internally encompass lowland (“terai” in Nepal), foothills and Himalayan sections. Tibetans invaded Sikkim in 1886–1887 through the Chumbi Valley and Bhutanese territory via the town of Pari, close to Yatung in Tibet, an important way-station for India-Tibet interactions.

Yatung was the crossroads, until the 1959 Chinese invasion, for trade between India, Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet. 17 Now most trade takes place with and through India.

The path of British general Younghusband's 1903–1911 forays from the Siliguri valley of India through its protectorate of Sikkim and into Tibet by way of the Chumbi valley came through the pass at Jelupla improved for that purpose by English engineers. From Siliguri the best approach to Tibet ran through the towns of Kalimpong in the foothills to Pedong (4,000 feet), Gnathong (12,000 feet), over 14,300 feet to Yatung (11,000 feet) via the Chumbi valley (9,000 feet) and the town of Pari to Gyantse, connecting to Xigaze. An alternate route through Sikkim crossed Kangra La (16,400 feet) via the Lachen gorge of the Tista and Arun rivers. 18 Control of the Chumbi Valley corridor clearly conferred access to Tibet and the quickest route to the capital Lhasa.

In the 1903–1907 period local Bhutanese ruler Ugyen Wangchuck leveraged control of Bhutan for his Wangchuck family with Britain's blessing in return for stability on colonial India's northern border. Previously the strongman of central Bhutan, his assistance of the Younghusband invasion of Tibet led to influential British endorsement of his aspirations to control all of Bhutan, confirmed by his installation as hereditary monarch in 1907. Similar to India's arrangement half a century later, the Bhutanese were promised friendship with the land to their south on condition that they not consort with any other major power – particularly the one to their north. 19 In another historical precursor, China's invasion of Tibet in 1910 precipitated the British-Bhutanese Treaty of Punakha that same year. Following the Pamir Boundary Commission of 1895, this agreement formed the basis for the 1949 India-Bhutan treaty defining Bhutan's relationship as a protectorate of India. The Commission emphasised that “geographically, politically, and ethnographically watersheds ... are the only true and stable boundaries in th[is] region ... the possession up to the headwaters of each system by one people constitutes the only frontier that has survived the lapse of time”. 20 The underlying goal on the part of parties controlling India was to firm up their influence with Bhutan in light of its northern border with India's competitor. 21 No less than fourteen passes link Bhutan with what is now the Chinese possession of Tibet.

While not considered a part of India by the British, Sikkim was included in India's sphere as an administrative protectorate. The British appointed a political office to re-structure Sikkim's affairs in 1888, formalising control from New Delhi. By the Indian census of 1891, Nepalese initially brought in to assist with road and building construction composed half of Sikkim's population, reflecting the British appraisal of their usefulness as a counter to Tibetan parts of the population. A century later, the 2001 census confirmed that three quarters of Sikkim was inhabited by Nepalese. The dispensation of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Kashmir, and Ladakh along India's Himalayan border was seen by India to be best secured by construing them “... as buffer and, as far as possible, client states” 22 in relation to China-fronting Tibet. The 1949 Treaty of Friendship between Britain and India formalised the handover of Bhutan's mentorship to the newly independent South Asian power. Sikkim's fate followed a different path, as China's activities in Tibet soon reminded India of the historic importance of the Himalayan region. In the

middle of June 1949 the Indian Political Officer informed the Sikkim cabinet they were dismissed in favour of direct rule by India. British administrative control was maintained by an Indian official loaned to Sikkim as a Prime Minister. In December 1950 Sikkim became an exclusive protectorate of India. Sikkim negotiated its status in light of India's turnover from a British colony to an independent continental giant, assured of “autonomy” by a treaty in late 1950. India furnished both funds and employees to the government of Sikkim – including appointing advisers that would ultimately lead to Sikkim's merger with India.

With its numerous Himalaya-piercing paths, Nepal rose in India's strategic estimation commensurate with China's rising dominance in Tibet. The “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” signed in 1950 between the two predominantly Hindu neighbours tilted Nepal's historically careful balance between China and India. Politically, economically, and culturally India's influence dominated Nepal, as India became increasingly involved in attempts to balance Nepal's de-stabilising nature between an autocratic monarchy and the impoverished, discontented subjects.

Tibetan uprisings in 1954–1955 heightened India's alarm over regional instability. China's 1954 publication of A Brief History of China including maps allocating to China large pieces of Bhutanese territory raised alarms in both Bhutan and India. 23 Chinese maps published four years later included all of Bhutan's southeast Trashigang District and large sections in the northeast as part of China. 24 The situation in Tibet unsettled both Nehru and Bhutan's third king, as China moved increasingly aggressively to establish its control on the Himalayas northern side. In September 1958 India's Prime Minister Nehru, accompanied by his daughter (and future Prime Minister) Indira, travelled to Thimphu on animal back via Gangtok, Sikkim and the Chumbi Valley to express support for Bhutan's independence. An active Border Roads Organization established the next year, following the Dalai Lama's forced flight out of Tibet under Chinese duress, was a direct outcome of the earlier trip. Bhutan's army perched on the country's northern border to alert Indian troops of any Chinese incursions; both armies currently conduct extensive joint training. Bhutan closed its northern border in 1959 following the escape of the Dalai Lama through the Chumbi Valley during the Chinese takeover of Tibet. The People's Liberation Army took this occasion to consolidate their control over eight Bhutanese enclaves across the Tibetan border. The next year Chinese incursions spilled over the border, and Bhutan cut off historic Himalayan trade over the passes with Tibet. In 1961 China published a new, less assertive Himalayan map including the two-hundred-mile, largely undemarcated border.

Bhutan's modernisation began with the aid of concerned mentor India. At India's urging, the First Five Year Plan introduced in 1961 featured road building, following the Nehru's rugged trip in 1958. This infrastructure tie also permitted Indian troop movement to shore up Bhutanese defences in the face of Chinese threats. In 1961 Bhutan also joined the Colombo Plan. Indians design and build many of Bhutan's roads and bridges with Indian labourers, and its troops are stationed in and around the major cities of Thimphu and Paro. India demonstrated its need for

access to Bhutan when its troops retreated through Bhutanese territory during the Sino-Indian border war in 1962. That same year war broke out along the Manas River pass linking the Assam plain to Phuentsholing, involving three anti-Indian rebel groups who were taking refuge on Bhutan's side of the dense jungle along the southeastern border. Nepal narrowly escaped serving as a battleground for both the 1962 and 1967 Sino-Indian clashes during the Natula Pass confrontation on Sikkim's border. India's hold over Nepal lies in its ability to shut off Nepal's markets, since it is too expensive to ship out goods other than through India. 25

By 1967, the demographic makeup of Sikkim was 20% Bhutia Lepshas, 70% Nepalese – a dangerously low minority in their own country. Contacts with China by Sikkim's monarch provoked Indian unhappiness, as it sought to control Sikkim's external relations. India's policy with Bhutan followed the Third Druk Gyalpo's interest in opening up his country as assurance against a spillover of Chinese activity in occupied Tibet. Bhutan was permitted to join the United Nations in 1971, and in 1972 the young Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck assumed the throne untimely vacated by his ill father. In 1973, Nepali migrants instigated riots against Sikkim's monarch, leading to intervention by Indian military forces to restore order. Continuing popular unhappiness with the monarch's rule led to demonstrations in 1974 that furnished an opportunity for India to assert more direct control over the monarchy. India's representatives presided over an election in April 1974, following an Indian-instigated “palace coup”, that abolished the monarch and made Sikkim “a constituent unit of India” followed by its relegation to an “associated state” by December 1974. 26 Indian troops deployed at Natula pass in April 1975, asserting their direct control over the pass to Tibet. The northern border of Bhutan remains largely a nature reserve, traversed by nomads and lightly settled by villages consisting of a handful of households. Bhutan's reputation as an ecological treasure serves as a tourist pull and generates income from the sale of medicinal herbs gathered by local residents and nomads. Chinese incursions occur on a variety of pretexts, most obviously in a 1979 “herder” intrusion that led to India-sanctioned direct Sino-Bhutan talks in 1984. 27 The status of Tibetan refugees in Bhutan was also settled in 1979: accept Bhutanese citizenship, or leave. 28

As with the other Himalayan nation-states, almost any land passage flows are far easier through India. This “geographic trump card” 29 was invoked to discipline Nepal in 1989, with decisive results from the demonstration of landlocked and mountain-blocked dependency on India for significant trade and transit. Kuti Pass, crossing within Nepal at Kodari on the route between Kathmandu-Lhasa, is rivalled only by the Chumbi valley passes for strategic trans-Himalayan access. Several other Nepal-Tibet roads (at Pokhara and Dazhu) were constructed with Chinese assistance leading up to the 1989 blockade of Nepal by India to protest an increasingly intolerable threat to the trans-Himalayan balance of power.

The underlying threat of the India-China alignment question came for Nepal with their differing support for allied forms of governance, with India representing democratisation and autocratic China tilting pro-monarchy. Recognition, along with resentment, of India's geographically enabled hegemony over Nepal continues in China, with the alternative the improvement and

extension of a road and rail network through Tibet to its Himalayan borders – and beyond. China's early mapped recognition of the cultural ties shared by Mongolia, Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim on her northern and western borders, and the contemporary claim to include several of these within China's realm by virtue of the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty patron-priest or tributary relationship, underlines the role of history and culture on political borders.

THE GREAT GAME CONTINUES

India and China's maneuvers to assert their own areas of control over the Himalayan heights resemble an extension of Britain and Russia's "Great Game" from an earlier century. 30 Indian Army detachments occupied parts of Lhasa and Yatong until China's takeover of Tibet in 1959, continuing Britain's assessment of the importance of this corridor. 31 The "chicken neck" of the Siliguri corridor, at only 20–30 km wide, links upland and lowland India in this region via the 150-foot-long Jelupla pass or the Natula Pass 5 km to the north. Chinese People's Liberation Army troops in Yatung control the Chumbi valley wedge between Sikkim and Bhutan. 32 China's consolidation of its control of Tibet is seen by India as necessitating an Indian line of influence on the adjoining edges across the Himalayas, rejecting China's calls for it to have an "equal relationship" with what India considers its clients, counter-balancing the Chinese absorption of Tibet. 33 The ongoing pushing of two large political powers against each other at opposing edges of the Himalayas gives no sign of either one subsiding or rising. Geographically, the Himalayas serve as a defensive barrier at both power's periphery.

Passes serve as either corridors of conflict or commerce. Construction of transportation infrastructure to heighten control of land, especially in areas around political boundaries, involves economic and military extensions of power. Roads deliver major ecological, economic, political, cultural, and demographic impacts, particularly in fragile, contested regions. Chinese soldiers were detected within Bhutan in November 2005, crossing bridges extending from roadways in remote areas of four northwestern districts, from which they later retreated. 34

Bhutan's maximum width of 300 km stretches more than three times that of Sikkim (88 km), but it is only one-third the size of Nepal. The boundary abutting India runs 605 km, compared with the contested border with China at 470 km. 35 The development of eastern Tibet's Chumbi valley, Bhutan's Haa Valley, and India's Darjeeling and West Bengal draw from similar Himalayan foothill resource potentials: hydropower, herders, eco-tourism and border trade. Bhutan's 31,000 megawatts of hydroelectric power could significantly assist India's power needs, particularly if the proposed US-India nuclear power treaty fails to go through. However, a rapidly developing Bhutan foresees problems meeting its own energy demands from industrial users, at least until anticipated new and larger dams become productive. Bhutan's economy remains tightly linked to India's, especially due to hydropower provision – the biggest source of income from trade and financing of capital projects, and the biggest expenditures/accounts deficits for new dams.

Preservation of the “Tawang salient” on Bhutan's eastern border also is of interest to India in trying to wall off China's southern options of expansion routes. The pre-McMahon boundary put the northern border of India's Assam state parallel to Bhutan's southern border and close to the Brahmaputra River. The McMahon Line created a “Northeast Frontier Agency” (NEFA) encompassing the town of Tawang, with a largely Tibetan population. This consequently enlarged the extent of Bhutan's eastern border with India at the expense of Tibet, and thus modern China, as sanctioned in the Simla Conference of 1913–1914. 36

An ongoing irritant in Bhutan–China relations lies with China's desire for an “equal relationship” with Nepal and Bhutan, while India insists on maintaining its “special” relationship with these two entities. The first contact regarding Bhutan's disputed northwest border since it was closed by Bhutan in 1959 came as a letter from Chinese Premier Chou Enlai to Indian Prime Minister Nehru. The basic issue involves demarcations along ridge lines, passes, and river banks. 37 Bilateral Bhutan–China border talks began in 1984. Detection of Chinese incursions via logging roads in 1996 led to the 1998 China and Bhutan conclusion of an “Agreement to Maintain Peace and Tranquility” concerning their shared border and Bhutan's status as an independent nation-state, the first significant bilateral agreement on the topic. China “reiterates its position to fully respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan”, 38 but the agreement fell short of establishing the political border defining the territory in question. A comparison with the boundary of 1989 often used as a baseline, with a reconfigured boundary shown on maps published since 2006 by several Bhutanese government departments, indicate that Bhutan itself is publishing maps showing a significantly diminished northern boundary that runs at the southern foot of the Himalayas rather than along the traditional ridge line or northern side of the mountain range. A northwestern slice of Ha province under consideration for accession to China in return for a complete boundary agreement has concerned India. Talks continue on an intermittent basis.

Construction of roads in Bhutan's western and northern border areas with China involve two particular considerations: the ecological sensitivity of the Bhutanese government which seeks to preserve no less than 60–70% of area as forested, and the military notion of keeping Bhutan's borders without major roads in order to hinder passage of incoming troops from the Chinese side. While troops from India, Bhutan, and China maintain positions in this area, most incursions and complaints involve timber extraction, animal herders, and nomads hunting for profitable medicinal plants. 39 A final agreement on the Indo–Bhutan border was concluded in mid-December 2006, leaving “the tri-junction with China” the only outstanding major border issue. 40 A new treaty between India and Bhutan concluded in February 2007 gave Bhutan greater freedom to pursue its own foreign affairs outside of India's prior knowledge and consent. This arrangement carried particular relevance for Sino–Bhutan boundary settlement negotiations. 41

Significantly, maps of Bhutan's northern border published since the year 2006 by two different departments in the Bhutanese government show a very different boundary line in Gasa province that runs south rather than north of the Himalayas as previously reflected in the base map of

1989. 42 Although the maps state that depictions “should not be considered an Authority on the Delineation of the International Boundary” 43 (DSLIR 2006), they do reflect permission to depict this significant change following the seventeenth boundary discussion session with China. Indications that a section of Haa province on Chumbi Valley's eastern border might be ceded to China come from negative commentary in the Indian and Bhutanese press reflecting on the historically strategic importance of this access to the Siliguri corridor. 44 In both cases the contemplated adjustments followed Bhutanese complaints of Chinese road incursions in these areas. Geographic access difficulties of terrain and climate melt in the face of military determination creating a reality on the ground.

Bhutan strategises maintenance of its demographic and cultural continuity in the face of external and internal migration. Its first accurate, total-count census, conducted over two days in mid-2004, found that “Migrants from Foreign Countries” comprised 6.9% of the country's population (44,420 out of a total of 634,982 occupants). Of these, 7,098 declined to state their country of origin. Most migrants are assumed to be Indians, who occupy a substantial number of the unskilled and low-skill labour jobs, particularly following large-scale expulsion of Nepalis two decades previously and the reluctance of Bhutanese to take such positions. Areas with the highest concentration of migrants included the capital city of Thimphu (10% of its 98,676 population, probably due to a construction boom), and the southeastern border county of Pemaghatel (21% of its 13,864 population). Major reasons given for migration in both rural and urban areas were for enhanced employment and education opportunities, the first and second most common reasons for urban dwellers, second and fourth place for rural-based migrants after “family” and “marriage”. 45

The opening of Natula Pass in July 2006 for a carefully delineated segment of goods between India (formerly Sikkim) and China (formerly Tibet) indicated the lingering potential importance and political perils of this topographically linked region. Resumption of transit through Natula occurred along with China's formal recognition of India's incorporation of Sikkim. An all-weather multi-lane highway is also envisioned as part of future plans, given intervening good behaviour. China frames its desire for restoration of relations with Bhutan as part of its “Develop the West” policies, seeking transit over Tibet-Bhutan passes as well. Building the world's largest statue of Buddha, destined to sit on the highest hill overlooking Bhutan's capital city, is seen by China as a major goodwill gesture – potentially to allay Bhutanese concerns with what is perceived as China's cultural genocide of Tibetan areas. A regional “growth triangle” spanning Sikkim, North Bengal, Nepal and Bhutan has been discussed, but ties to India are likely to remain paramount given much easier access through favourable topography. The potential impact of revenues from Chinese tourists, one of the major economic foci of Bhutan, remains a consideration for enhanced revenue generation.

The slim link south to India via Sikkim consists of one road to Siliguri, much as Bhutan's narrow two-lane highway is the only cross-country route connecting its major cities. The Siliguri corridor “chicken neck” forms India's outpost in relation to any Chinese moves coming out of the

Chumbi Valley. One of several extensions of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway under discussion involves a rail line from Tibet's capital city – with its large military sector – through the Chumbi valley to Yadong close to Natula Pass, bridging the Himalayan region. 46 The importance of India as a link to easy transportation and trade routes for Himalayan areas continues to be that nation-state's major advantage which China is geographically unable to offset, as demonstrated by the crippling blockade of Nepal in 1988 that in part answered China's military blow to India's regional prestige by the 1962 confrontation.

Bhutan tries to maintain the integrity of its borders and its sovereignty in a variety of ways. Most dramatically, in December 2003 the Fourth King led a force of Bhutanese military in a successful charge along the southern border with India, a frontier contested by Assamese splinter rebel groups (United Liberation Front of Assam, a.k.a. ULFA) 47 This action expelled rebels seeking shelter from their anti-Indian activities across Bhutan's lightly populated southeastern border. The short campaign confirmed Bhutanese territorial control, blunting both India's offer/threat to cross Bhutan's boundary to deal with the rebels and China's interest in doing the same in the north to curb alleged Tibetan encroachments. Bhutan seeks to maintain sovereignty by navigating a middle path between India's "forward defence thesis" enforced by economic dependence and China's push for more regional influence through treaty talks and military means, in the name of promoting autonomy. 48 The collapse of the institution of monarchy in Nepal under pressure from persistent rebellion contrasts sharply with Bhutan's orderly transfer of power via voluntary abdication of the popular Fourth King in favour of his son and a parliamentary form of government.

Geography is not destiny, as witnessed in the very different current and evolving states of political entities in this Himalayan region. Tibet is presently subsumed as a buffer under culturally distinct China. Tibet's culturally related cousin Sikkim was absorbed by culturally distinct India, and Bhutan (maintained by India as a client buffer state) shields itself from inundation by India's cultural cousin Nepal, whose migrants swamped Sikkim. To the north an entirely different relationship with China results in territorial loss reflecting a hegemonic nation extending its power over its Himalayan periphery. Strenuous efforts to consolidate, extend, and/or subvert power within national borders indicates the importance of these boundaries in relation to and reflection of the cultures they contain.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this examination of the eastern Himalayan region was to trace the historical evolution and contestation of borders in order to illustrate how they reflect political power markers played out as cultural signifiers. Borderlands in the eastern Himalaya are treated as spaces controlled by nation-states whose boundaries demonstrate demarcations of power contestations and the politics of identity that seek to preserve distinctiveness. The continuing shifting of borders supports theoretical assertions of the importance of boundaries and the malleability of territorially tied distinctions they are meant to draw. Bhutan serves as a particular

focus of examination since it clearly considers that its threatened national integrity depends on controlling its borders. Bhutan's goal is to preserve the three areas of culture, economic-environmental sustainability and political control. This triple-layered territoriality of national legitimacy⁴⁹ is projected over a physical landscape along linear (often corresponding to physical) demarcations.

Consideration of the multi-layered roots of the eastern Himalayan region's fragile frontier zones is crucial for analytical understanding of its importance and contested prognosis for future development. Boundaries in this geographically isolated region changed markedly over the past century, reflecting the flow of political power and cultural influences in an environment only lightly sliced through by transit via mountain passes⁵⁰ (Table 2). Plains on Bhutan's southern boundary were largely ceded to India during Britain's imperial hegemony, which also inserted still-maintained land buffers with Sinified Tibet along Bhutan's eastern (Tibetan demographic Tawang) and western (Siliguri corridor) borders. China and India, as well as their bordering (and former) governments have reason to appreciate the role of major passes, valleys, corridors and lowland access points in their Himalayan interstices since their control is vital to defending the borders of nation-states which such access routes span. Most prominent among these are the Siliguri corridor (West Bengal's "chicken neck" access through the former country of Sikkim between Nepal and Tibet), the Chumbi Valley of Tibet (separating India's Sikkim from Bhutan, and a historic route to Lhasa), and Bhutan's other passes to Tibet, the Tawang salient and Assam (Table 1).

Areas from Sikkim in the west through Arunachal Pradesh east of Bhutan share a similar Buddhist culture, Tibetan demographics, and de-stabilising impacts from neighbouring Nepal, China and India. None possess self-sufficient economies, but depend on trade outlets with lowland India. The flood of Nepali immigrants that swamped Sikkim led to enforcement of rules visibly setting off Bhutanese distinctiveness in order to tighten any leaks in its cultural container defined by space and practices.⁵¹ Quiet adjustments in a section of the northwestern border reflect military and political pressure from China, shifting the boundary to the southern foothills of the Himalaya to consolidate China's control over the entire range, rather than just a line along the highest rim of a land sparsely populated by nomads. That these nomads share an ethnicity and cultural affinity with China's restive, poorly integrated province of Tibet possibly motivates China's desire for geographically enhanced control of their space.

The preceding examination reveals that successful demarcation of boundaries in this region only occurs in response to the power of a nation to enforce them. Power relations reflecting economic and military considerations bound space⁵²; cultural preservation makes space worth delimiting.⁵³ In light of the historic importance of rare passes through the world's highest mountain range and great power expansion, the nature of Himalayan borders in this region merit continued interest. The areas of greatest potential political instability also encompass areas of rare and fragile cultural and ecological preserves. A triad of political, economic and military concerns feed India's fervent desire to assure a preeminent position in its Nepal-Bhutan client zone,

continuing colonial Britain's balance of power. China seeks to rekindle the Himalayan countries' cultural and economic ties with Tibet via the traditional overland route. The stakes for Bhutan include cultural continuity, ecological sovereignty, and regional political-economic partnerships to maintain viable boundaries in a tenuous environment on the stairs to the roof of the world. The extension of geopolitical boundary theory to encompass a broad consideration of the human and physical forces underlying dynamic political borders serves to explain past shifts and indicate fault lines for possible political seismic activity, yielding a more robust arena for geographic examination of evolving regions.

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