

R.D. Pradhan



Dragon's Shadow over Arunachal

A Challenge to India's Polity

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Rupa & Co

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Author's Note

China lays claim to Arunachal' has made headlines in the past few months. Recently in February 2008, when Dr Manmohan Singh, the prime minister of India, visited Arunachal and called it the 'Rising Sunshine State', the Chinese protested over his visit. The External Affairs minister of India countered that by stating that 'Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India and the Prime Minister can visit any part of the country'. Since January 2007, the Chinese have crossed the Line of Actual Control a hundred and forty times. The Defence minister has assured us that there is a mechanism on the ground to sort out these intrusions, 'We do not want to aggravate the prevailing tensions on the border'. That is understandable. But what have we done to resolve the issues that were thrown up after the 1962 war with China? We have indulged in talks and more talks, that have taken us nowhere for the last fifty years. In the meantime, China has upped its demands and now lays unabashed claim to Arunachal.

I find that few have cared so far about the northeast, but because of recent events, more Indians are curious about the land and its people, about whom generally very little is known. I think it is opportune to acquaint them with Arunachal. I owe an obligation to do so, because I served the state, as its first governor from 19 March 1987 for three years. As the governor, I took the oath of

office for the welfare and well-being of the state and the people. I worked for them, fully supported by my wife. We moved extensively, made friends, studied their social and cultural heritage and shared their lives.

It is tragic that we from mainland India, including the media, have taken so little interest in the northeast that is one-eighth the land mass of our country, and have hardly made any effort to get to know the people, especially the tribes who live in that geographical space. It is only when some serious breakdown of law and order takes place, because of insurgency or inter-tribal conflict, or, because of China's recent claim, that the northeast finds space in the media and in our awareness.

Although, now settled down in the far away metropolis of Mumbai and living in an apartment facing the Arabian sea, my wife and I recall our loving association with the area along the Himalayan ranges and of the people who may be ethnically different but who are a part of the great fabric that is India. Geography, history and culture bind that area with those who inhabit the rest of the country. We found that the whole region has remained somewhat isolated from the rest of India and the ignorance is due to distance; geography and indifference.

The political establishment in Delhi was mostly uninformed and apathetic. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the Nehru-Gandhi family, including Indira, Rajiv and Sonia are an exception and are therefore adored and loved in the northeast. Only in recent years, political parties other than the Congress have started setting up political base in Arunachal. But generally, the aim is to grab power by defections and garner a few votes to be used in coalition politics at the centre. In the process, wider and more serious issues of national security and development of border areas have not received adequate attention.

For a variety of reasons, while all these years we have been tardy, the Chinese have been active, not only by developing infrastructure in the Tibet region but also by being accessible to our people by using

television and other media to provide entertainment and propaganda. They are cleverly infiltrating their minds knowing that in remote mountain areas, boundaries do not separate people. In a way ethnic affinity, social customs, religious beliefs and barter-trade to share each others' products and requirements, reinforce their interdependence. Thus, so called international boundaries are soft targets, especially when the border is not demarcated on the ground. Nor can it be watched adequately by troops because of high mountain terrain and harsh living conditions. Although sparsely populated, our best defence can only be the people of Arunachal.

Admittedly in past five decades, the central government has done a great deal to spread education, provide health and medical facilities and integrate the state with the northeastern region as a whole. However for the wrong reasons the infrastructure, especially road communications leading to border areas and for lateral movement across the state, was neglected. Only recently Dr Manmohan Singh, the prime minister on a visit to the state announced the Trans-Arunachal highway, promised a special package for accelerated development. This is welcome and is of absolute necessity for the people. But more important is to get to know them, their way of life and their special needs. And also to be aware of how living in far-off inaccessible border areas in the high Himalayas, subject the people to isolation, and mental and psychological problems. For them, the memory of the October-November 1962 conflict is not too far remote.

I believe that getting to know these people and their way of life is the only way to reinforce their identity and unity with India and Indians as a whole. That is the provocation for this book. During our stay at Itanagar, we moved about in far-off interior areas of the state right up to the border and shared their hospitality and their life. I am mentioning *our*, because in the very first meeting with Arunachalis, we found what an important role women play in their

society. My wife took a deep interest in their family structure and the social issues, and she kept a day to day diary of our stay and recorded her observations. This indeed proved to be of immense help and has aided me to refresh my memory for this book.

A point to be noted is that this is not an in-depth study about the region and the people. It is informative, only to generally acquaint the reader with the geography and main tribes inhabiting the south of the Himalayan range. The narrative is based on what we observed, learnt and got briefed about by several scholars and administrators who had served in the region. It is partly a memoir, and in the present situation, it is intended to inform, if not educate one, about the state and of the people inhabiting it. And also, to make one aware of the problem that we may have to face in case we do not take China's threat seriously.

In the Prologue I have set out a brief geographical description of the region and the parameters of the Chinese claim. Also, the basis and background to India's firm assertion to sovereignty over the area. *Part One* acquaints the reader with the land and the people. The tribes are identified with the land that they habit. Accordingly I have presented a brief account of major tribal societies with reference to their land and their geographic location. *Part Two* presents the historical background and Tibet's and China's involvement along the border and also the role of pre-independence and post-independence Indian administration. In doing so, I have relied on a wealth of literature and archival material available in published form. I have not cluttered the text with annotations and foot-notes, unless unavoidable. A bibliography at the end will indicate the source material. *Part Three* deals with the present as well as the prospects for the future of the land and the people.

Coming to the title of the book, the dragon was a symbol of imperial China's authority. The Chinese emperor sat on a dragon throne, rode a dragon boat and slept on a dragon bed. The present

rulers of China have a sense of history and a long memory of their past. For them, their claim over Arunachal is a part of a century-old history of the Tibet-India border negotiations. They now feel that it is time to renew their claim.

The dragon's moves over the border are a serious threat. It may appear today as a shadow cast by floating clouds. But in the near future, it can pose a serious threat to the northeastern region and to India's security, and we should not take their claim lightly.

Prologue

China's Claim

In September 1962, China attacked across the Indian border in the northeast and the Indian army faced a debacle. It was then thought that the issue that led to war was about the exact location of the border that had been marked on the map as the McMahon Line in 1914, and that the dispute related to certain pockets along the border. Then how is it that the Chinese have recently started claiming Arunachal? There is substantial history to back up their claim.

China's claim rests on history, as interpreted by them, during the British occupation of India; their relation with the Tibet region, which enjoyed autonomy—if not sovereignty—till the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army of China marched into Lhasa in January 1950. It also rests on Buddhism, particularly in the Tawang region, and the absence of effective administrative presence on the part of the British in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), prior to the independence of India. NEFA is well identified with reference to the parameters of geography.

In 1959, when the question of the exact location of the border of the two countries was first raised, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En-lai, premier of the People's Republic of China, set

up on 25 April 1959, a joint working group of officials to 'meet and examine, check and study all historical material relevant to the boundary question...and draw up a report for submission to the two Governments.'

During the discussions, officials of the Indian government described India's eastern boundaries in great detail with reference to the geographical latitude, longitude, river basins and valleys. These were as follows:

East of Nepal the boundary follows the watershed between the Tista river system, and the Yaru Chu and the sources of the Amo Chu in Tibet and crosses the Natu and Jelep Passes. Thereafter it crosses the Amo Chu, and following the watershed between the Amo Chu and Paro Chu, joins the Great Himalayan Range at Chomo Lhari and runs east along the crest of that range upto the Mela Pass (Long. 91° 40' E and Lat. 27° 57' N). There it turns south and about 13 miles from the Mela Pass, turns east, crosses the Namjang river, and following the crest of the Great Himalayan Range which is also the watershed between the Chayal Chu in Tibet and the Kameng, Kamala Khru rivers in India, proceeds east and north east. Thereafter it crosses the Subansiri river and then the Tsari river just south of Migytun and taking a north-easterly direction crosses the Tunga Pass (approximately Long. 94° 10' E and Lat 28° 59' N). It then runs east, crosses the Dihang and ascends the watershed Chimdru Chu and Rongta Chu in Tibet and the Dibang and its tributaries in India. The boundary crosses the Yonggyap Pass (Long. 95° 5' E and Lat. 29° 13' N) and Kangri Karpo Pass (Long. 96° 5' E and Lat. 29° 28' N) in this sector. It then crosses the Luhit river and a few miles south of Rima and joins the tri-junction of the India, Burma and China boundaries near the Diphu Pass.

According to the Chinese officials:

The Sino-Indian boundary has never been formally delimited and there is only a traditional customary boundary line between the two countries. The location and features of this boundary line in its various sectors are as follows:-

The eastern sector—The terrain features of this sector are comparatively simple. The greatest part of it—the portion from the southeastern tip of Bhutan eastward to a point west of 94 degrees East Longitude, and then northward to Nizamghat follows all along the line where southern foot of the Himalayas touches the plains on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River. This portion of the line crosses the Subansiri River south of Bini and the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) River in the vicinity of Pasighat. From Nizamghat onwards, the line turns southeastwards and enters mountainous terrain, passing through Painlon Pass, following the valley of the lower reaches of the Tsayul River and reaching the tri-junction of China, India and Burma.

They specified their complaint:

In the eastern sector, the entire area north of the traditional customary line up to the so called McMahon line is now under Indian occupation.

According to Indian officials curiously, the southern boundary of China formed by the Himalayas, not just in the Middle Sector of India but also with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, lay along the watershed formed by the Himalayas. The same watershed formed the northern boundary between Burma (Myanmar) and China. Then why was it that it was only in the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian boundary did the alignment claimed by China swoop down to the southern foothills of the Himalayas? The Official's Report states:

The Chinese sought to answer this by stating that their alignment in the Eastern Sector corresponded to the southern boundaries Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. They repeatedly emphasized their argument about the traditional boundary. To counter their argument the Indian team produced voluminous evidence to show that even on traditional and customary basis India's claim rested on sound basis.

Their claim along the southern border of Arunachal Pradesh, described by them as the 'the traditional customary boundary', generally along the *Inner Line* devised by the British administration, was to lay down a border to identify the geographic area occupied by the tribes and for administrative purposes to separate them from the people of Assam living on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. For India, the southern border delineated on survey maps was purely an administrative arrangement to insulate the tribal from non-tribal areas. The northern border, namely the McMahon Line was the one delineated on the survey map in 1914 on the basis of negotiations between the British, the Tibetan government and the China. The Indian claim rests on legal and negotiated agreements between India and Tibet, which had added sanction of treaties when the Indo-Tibetan Boundary Agreement of 24/25 March 1914, and the Simla Convention of 3 July 1914 were concluded. It had been signed and ratified by the Tibetan government. In a way, the foundation of China's claim was laid in 1914. What China is claiming in its recent provocative statements is the repetition of the position they stated in 1960. What seemed to be a border issue in 1962 has been for them an issue over territory that lies between the *Inner Line* and the *McMahon Line*. What is therefore at stake is the major area comprising Arunachal Pradesh.

The people who inhabit the areas between the two lines are the subject matter of *Part I* of this book.

Acknowledgements

The people of Arunachal are the inspiration and the subject matter for this book. They made our sojourn of three years educative and memorable.

Dr Gautam Sen, former director of the National Institute Strategic and Defence Analysis (NISDA), Pune University advised that any work relating to geographical areas congruous to India's international borders can not remain an anecdotal sojourn for information alone. That is how it is in the context of the China's claim over Arunachal.

My special thanks to Vidyadhar Kandalgaonkar for secretarial assistance for this and several other books.

This is my third book with my publishers Rupa, and I gratefully acknowledge their interest in my writings.

PART I

Land and the People

1

My Appointment—Off to Itanagar

My appointment as the first governor of the newly-created state of Arunachal Pradesh was most unexpected. I retired as the Union Home secretary on 30 July 1986. There was some talk that as one who had successfully negotiated the Assam and Mizoram accords and had restored peace and the constitutional process in those areas, I should be rewarded with a governorship. However I had my own ideas about my post-retirement life. Before leaving Delhi to settle down in Bombay (now Mumbai), I told Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that I was not ready to accept any governorship. I was only fifty-eight years old and I had decided to engage myself in public service—not necessarily electoral politics. Apparently he kept that in mind and I was awarded the Padma Bhushan on the next Republic Day, on 26 January 1987.

It was late at night on 14 February 1997 that I was woken up by a telephone call from the prime minister's private secretary who said, 'Boss is in a meeting, therefore he cannot talk to you, but he wants to know whether you would go to Arunachal as governor.' I asked Vincent George to thank the PM for the offer and to tell him not to consider me for the governorship.

Early the next morning, the PM spoke to me and said, 'Pradhan-Ji, I want you to be there at this time in national interest. We may soon have a problem from across the border.' I told the PM that if that was the situation, there was no question of my saying no. Somewhat hesitantly I added that my wife was visiting our son, also named Rajiv, in Switzerland and I would have to consult her. It was four o'clock in Europe and not the best time to seek her consent. The PM laughed and said that he would await my reply.

I spoke to my wife early next morning and explained the offer and what the PM had said. I asked her to consider whether she was ready to spend the next few years in a far-off corner of India's northeastern region. Knowing that I would never say no, if any situation of national interest required me, she said: 'If it is a national task there is no question of considering our inconvenience. Please tell the PM that I am ready to play my role as the governor's wife'.

The PM gave me four weeks to assume the post. In the meantime, the PM inaugurated Arunachal Pradesh as the twenty-fifth state of the Indian Union on 20 February 1987. Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam was asked to hold temporary charge till I took over. The next day, I got the first taste of China's renewed interest in the NEFA when the Chinese foreign office lodged a protest saying they would never recognise the state.

I then knew that my sojourn was going to be exciting, and I might have to face a situation similar to October 1962, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army's so-called volunteers had attacked across Thagla. We started preparations for our journey to the far-off northern border of India.

I was fortunate to get some first hand-briefing about the state from two distinguished civil servants who had spent many years serving in that area. On the day the appointment was announced, B.K. Nehru, ICS, who had been the governor of Assam in the 1970s came over along with his wife to greet us. One of the most distinguished civil servants of the country, B.K. Nehru had been

the governor of Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, and of Gujarat. They had many friends from the northeast and talked highly of the tribal culture and the way of living of the various tribes. That was very interesting as well as reassuring for me.

Another visitor was Nari Rustomjee, ICS, who had served as advisor to the governor of Assam on tribal areas. He had worked closely with Dr Verrier Elwin to evolve a policy for administration of those areas. His wife and he were genuinely glad at the appointment, but their briefing about life amongst the tribes, their eating habits and animal sacrifices, was not very reassuring. In contrast to BK and his wife who had talked of what was unique there, the Rustomjees talked of what we would *not* like, and what, as civilised (?) persons we shall miss. However, they meant well. After a few months we found that while the northeast had changed, and the Rustomjees remembered it as it was when they left in 1972.

The most touching moment was the farewell dinner that Shankar Dayal Sharma, the governor of Maharashtra hosted at the Raj Bhawan. He invited to a banquet all the former governors who were in Bombay. We met there A.L. Dias, ICS, former governor of West Bengal and his wife, former air-chief Idris Latif, ex-governor of Maharashtra and his wife Bilkis, Mrs Renu Mukherjee, widow of India's first air-chief and former governor of Gujarat, Homi Talyarkhan, former cabinet minister in Maharashtra and ex-governor of Sikkim and his wife Thrity, as well as several dignitaries. Shankar Dayal and Vimlaji were our well-wishers. Even after he was elevated to high posts of the vice-president, and later as the president of India, he and his wife continued to extend to us their hospitality and affection, and also visited Itanagar on our invitation.

On 17 March 1987, we were in New Delhi on our way to begin our sojourn in the northeast. We were put up at the Arunachal state guest house; a very modest establishment as compared to other stately mansions. During the two-day stay in New Delhi, while I got busy with official calls and briefings, my wife quickly glanced

through several books on the NEFA in the resident commissioner's office. She was impressed by the number of books and publications on a variety of subjects and decided to make full use of the treasure trove of information.

A young police officer named Jumke Bagra had been sent to Delhi to escort the governor-designate. He had Mongloid features and we could not guess his age, and we found him soft spoken and bright. I decided to appoint him as my ADC. Bagra remained in that post throughout my stay in Arunachal. I found that prior to joining the police, he had served as a revenue officer and had worked in various districts. His knowledge was phenomenal and he became my wife's guide on matters in which as a woman, she was more interested: the life of the tribes, family, children, marriage customs, education and health. Bagra was discreet and made sure that we were properly briefed about the sensitivities of the different tribes inhabiting the state.

We flew from Delhi to Guwahati where we were received by the staff of Bhisma Narain Singh, the governor of Assam. He was also officiating as the governor of Arunachal Pradesh. After dinner, he briefed me about political as well as other matters. The next day, we flew to Itanagar in an Indian Air Force M-8 chopper. Mr K.N. Saikia, the chief justice of the Assam high court accompanied us. He would administer the oath of office to me.

'Never forget that the basic challenge in South-East Asia is between India and China. That Challenge runs along the spine of Asia Never let the Chinese patronize you.'

-Jawaharlal Nehru in Frank Moraes' *Witness to an Era: India 1920 to the Present Day* (1973).

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