

Reviews



Books

General

B er nec  Guyot-R echard, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 348 pages, 20 black and white illustrations, 6 maps. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN: 9781107176799.

While a substantial body of scholarship exists concerning nineteenth- and twentieth-century competition for authority over the central Himalayas, enquiries into that contest in the eastern Himalayas are less common. *Shadow States* contributes to that enquiry in several ways through a narrative of events and processes that occurred there particularly in the period 1910–1962, although the title does not clearly define the fact that its concern is with the *eastern* Himalayas.

The author states that “the aim of this book [is] to suggest new ways to think about contemporary Sino-Indian relations” (265), with that rethinking primarily being through the equation of the efforts of the two powers to control the southern reaches of the eastern Himalayas. While largely succeeding in that aim through its analysis and discussion, the premise rests on rather insecure foundations. The primary thesis is that post-colonial India and China were both imperial powers contesting hegemony over foreign peoples in the eastern Himalayas. But in equating the two powers the author rather understates the extent to which the region was within colonial India. Indeed an “Indian” understanding of the northeast as being Indian, and its exploration and mapping within the boundaries of an Indian nation, dates to at least the eighteenth century.

A problem with the author’s thesis is that while Tawang—taken from Tibet for strategic reasons—is a separate issue, there was little if any real “Chinese threat” to the northeast until the mid-twentieth century. That an Indian identity and administration was not more actively established there until the twentieth century owes more to climate, terrain, and disease than an absence of political will. Those factors meant a colonial state presence was not economically viable and as on the northwest frontier, therefore, colonial officials were content to allow self-governing tribal areas as long as those inhospitable regions excluded (other) foreign powers. Yet, throughout the nineteenth century the systematic gathering of intelligence enabled British India to build

up a considerable body of knowledge concerning what they considered undisputedly part of India.

Thus, in the early twentieth century, medical and technological advances opened these regions to colonial officials who traveled throughout the tribal realms, mapping their domains and drawing them firmly into the idea of an Indian nation. A British political officer was stationed in Sadiya even before Chinese frontier official Zhao Erfeng briefly extended Chinese authority in Eastern Tibet to the frontier with Assam. Certainly, as the author notes, Erfeng's activities stimulated British enquiries into the region, but the 1911 murder of Political Officer Noel Williamson by Abor tribesman was of more immediate significance. World War II then saw an influx of state agents (such as the Shillong Intelligence Officer Eric Lambert), who were concerned—rather ironically in view of later developments—to ensure Sino-Indian cooperation against Japan. The multitude of colonial reports on the region are easily accessible, and the author's thesis might have been refined through greater reference to them. It was only under Communist government that China actively sought, and seeks, to subvert the development of an Indian identity in this region.

The book is divided into three parts, dealing with the periods from 1910–1950, 1950–1959, and 1959–1962. It compares the perspectives and activities of both states during those periods and, to the extent possible with limited sources, the extent to which the local tribal groups responded to those initiatives. Due attention is paid to the influence of Verrier Elwin, whose rather idealistic philosophy of tribal development in benign isolation was strongly supported by Prime Minister Nehru in the late 1950s.

The strength of this work lies in its analysis of events in the 1950s and 1960s. The Communist Chinese invasion of Tibet took India by surprise, as did their invasion of India in 1962. Following the Chinese move into Tibet, India consolidated its position in the northeast. As the author discusses in part 2, the actual annexation of Tawang and manning of McMahon Line outposts established geopolitical facts on the ground, and Nehru then adopted the isolationist policies espoused by anthropologist Elwin. Access to the northeast was subsequently restricted, and traditional cross-border trade routes were cut, separating tribes from their now Communist-controlled Tibetan neighbors. The subsequent Chinese rejection of the McMahon Line and limitations on cross-border trade again altered the status quo. As a result, the Border Roads Organization began to improve access to northeast India in 1960 and India began to strengthen its military position there. Military rather than development imperatives were already primary before the 1962 attack.

China's motives in launching the 1962 war have long been questioned. In part 3 of the book, the author makes an interesting argument that one factor was a Chinese attempt to gain local support and to offer a potential alternative to an Indian identity. Their troops thus attacked the symbols of Indian government while trying to avoid alienating the local people. But their effort failed, for “the coercive power of the[ir] state could never be concealed” (179). However, this is not simplified as obvious “opposition between a democratic India and an authoritarian PRC” (180). Using the theoretical insights of James Scott's work, the author argues that local people preferred Indian rule because India's vulnerability gave them the possibility of negotiating power with the Indian state and shaping that state's presence. China's actions in Tibet had, in contrast, demonstrated their intolerance of local interests.

Scott's work identifies groups unwilling to submit to a coercive state and this study of peoples forced to choose between two such states provides an interesting development of Scott's model. It points out that "[t]he presence of the 'other country,' the shadow state, gives local inhabitants a measure of leverage against state-authorities" (268). Both authors, however, face the problem that sources for local non-elite perspectives are scanty. Written sources are almost invariably elite sources, and despite the author's best intentions to represent the "subalterns," even the fresh sources here—particularly tour diaries—are by outsiders. But perhaps more use might have been made of evidence for groups relocating. Most of Pemako's population chose to move to India after the Chinese takeover, and the absence of evidence for groups preferring Chinese authority might have been highlighted here.

The author's arguments are most convincing when tied to primary sources, and this work is thus of particular value in regard to events on the ground in the 1950s and early 1960s. As is often the case with dissertation-based monographs, they are on less certain ground when dealing with neighboring issues. But this work is a stimulating development from Scott's model, which draws attention to the limited and uneven impact of nation-building strategies in this region and provides an innovative framework for understanding recent events there. Its analysis, however, is weakened by the underlying equation of Indian and Chinese imperial strategies. Himalayan peoples often vote with their feet, and when they do they flee to more democratic realms, not to Communist China.

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