

Historical Background of the Himalayan Frontier of India

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India's northern frontier is a traditional one, in the sense that it has lain approximately where it now runs for nearly three thousand years. The areas along this frontier, which is nearly 2,500 miles long from the Kuen Lun mountains in the far north to the junction with Burma in the east, have always been a part of India: At times they were independent principalities, and in other periods. They were incorporated in large empires like the Mauryan and the Gupta; but always the people and the rulers regarded themselves as Indians and remained within the Indian fold. Occasionally Tibetan rulers overran these areas; but these invasions were always exceptional and temporary, and never did these territories become part of Tibet. It is a long and continuous tradition that lies behind the present frontier of India.

This northern frontier of India is for much of its length the crest of the Himalayan ranges. The Himalayas have always dominated Indian life, just as they have dominated the Indian landscape. One of the earliest Sanskrit texts, though its exact date is uncertain—the *Vishnu Purana*—makes it clear that the Himalayas formed the frontier of India. It states that the country south of the Himalayas and north of ocean is called Bharat, and all born in it are called Bharatiyas or Indians.

***uttaram yat samudrasya himadres caiva daksinam
varsam tad (tam) bharatam nama bharati yatra santatih..***

The earliest reference to the Himalayas is in the Rig Veda which was written about 1500 B.C. It states that the Himalayas symbolize all mountains (10th Mandala, 10th Adhyaya, Sukta 121.4.).

The Kena Upanishad, written sometime about 1000 B.C., speaks of Uma the daughter of the Himalayas—Umam haimavatim. The legend is that Uma, the daughter of the Himalayas, revealed the mystic idealism of the Upanishads to the gods. This is an imaginative expression of the historical fact that the thought the Upanishads was developed by the dwellers in the forests and fastnesses of the Himalayas. For centuries thereafter, the striving the Indian spirit was directed towards these Himalayan fastnesses. Siva was the blue-necked, snow-crowned mountain god; Parvati was the spring-maiden daughter of the Himalayas; Ganga was her elder sister; and Meru, Vishnu's mountain, was the pivot the universe.

The Himalayan shrines are still the goal of every Hindu pilgrim. These references to the Himalayas continue down the centuries show that the inhabitants of India had a first-hand knowledge this region. The Mahabharata, written sometime after 400 B.C states that all the rulers of India took part in the war. The list of kingdoms may not establish the historical fact of their participation in the war, but it is adequate evidence of geographical knowledge.

It has even been held that the Pandavas-'pale-face'-belonged to a yellow-tinted, Himalayan, non-Aryan tribe which practiced polyandry. The *Papancha-Sudani* says that one branch of the Kurus lived in the trans-Himalayan region known as Uttara-Kuru. In the days of Aitareya Brahmana and the Mahabharata some of the Kurus were still living beyond the Himalayas. The unity of this whole Himalayan region during this period is shown by the statement in the Sabhaparva of the Mahabharata, that Arjuna on one of his campaigns, returned from Pragjyotisha (Assam) to Uluka (in northern Punjab), through the inner, outer, and adjacent belts of the Himalayas. In fact, Pragjyotisha was a name transplanted from the eastern Punjab to Assam. Arjuna is also stated to have defeated the people living around lake Manasarovar. The Himalayas became a symbol of steadfastness and dignity. The Bhagavad Gita, describing the perfection of the Almighty, states 'that' of immovable things he is the Himalaya Sthavaranam himalaya. The Ramayana, probably of about the same date as the Mahabharata, compares the steadfastness of Rama to the Himalayas-sthairyena himavaniva. It also says that king Amurataraja founded the city of Pragjyotisha, and his grandson Viswamitra practiced tapas upon the banks of the Kausiki, flowing through the Himalayas in the north-west part of the Pragjyotisha region.

After the period of the Epics, we are on firmer historical ground. It is highly probable that both Gautama the Buddha and Mahavira belonged to the Himalayan tribes. The empire of Chandragupta Maurya, towards the end of the 4th century B.C., comprised the whole of India north of the Narbada, as well as Afghanistan. Kautilya's Arthashastra refers to the worship of mountains, and looks on the Himalayas as divine mountains. The distribution of Asoka's inscriptions shows that his empire included Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Nepal, and the whole of India except Assam upto Mysore and Madras. Inscriptions have been found near Kalsi, in the northern part of Dehra Dun district, and at Lalitapatan in the Nepal valley. Further evidence of the inclusion of the Himalayan terrain in Asoka's empire is provided by Rock Edict XIII, which refers to the Nabhapamtis of Nabhaka, probably identical with Na-pei-hra, referred to by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien early in the 5th century A.D. as being located near Kapilavastu.

The next great development in Indian history was the establishment of the Kushan Empire in north-west India in the first century A.D. These rulers belonged to the Yueh-chi tribe of nomads in Central Asia. But they were neither Tibetans nor Chinese; the description we have of them is that of large pink-faced men, came under Hindu and Buddhist influence. One of the later rulers was called Vasudeva, a Hindu name. In fact Kadphises II came into collision with the Chinese who were now for the first time entering into relations with Central and West Asia. Kadphises was defeated by the Chinese, but his successor Kanishka avenged defeat; and a Chinese prince is reported to have lived in Kanishka's court as a hostage. At its height the Kushan empire included the Central Asian

provinces of Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan, and extended to the borders of Parthia and Persia. But it was essentially an Indian, empire, in that Indian influences percolated into these provinces, while Central Asian influences on India were superficial. The Kharoshti records discovered in what is now Chinese Turkestan bear traces of Indian names like Krishnasena and Indian titles like Devaputra. The Kharoshti script and the Prakrit language were introduced. Even the Sassanians of the third century A.D. regarded Bactriana as virtually an Indian kingdom and the Oxus as a river of the Buddhists and the Brahmins. Kanishka was a Buddhist, and Buddhist texts as well as a large number of other Kushan documents have been found in numerous places in Central Asia where Indian colonies had flourished. . During the day of the Kushan empire, which straddled the mountains which now form India's northern boundary, India's political and cultural influence swept deep into China. If, however the Kushans were of foreign stock who became, if we may use the phrase, 'naturalised' Indians, the Guptas, who ruled the greater part of India from about 320 to 647 A.D., were of Indian stock. Samadragupta, the second of the line, thoroughly subdued the princes in the northern plains, and the boundary of his empire ran along the Himalayas. On his coins appears the figure of the goddess Haimavati. Kamarupa (Assam), Nepal, and Kartripura (Ktimaon and Garhwal) are said to have been tributary kingdoms .situated on the frontiers of his dominions. The literature of the period shows that the Himalayas were a part of India, and the ple were familiar with it. Kalidasa in the Raghuvvarresa says that Raghu conquered areas to the north of the Himalayas, from Hemakuta (Kailas) to Kamarupa, thereby suggesting that this Indian kingdom (which is now Assam) stretched even beyond the Himalayas. His *Kumarasambhava* opens with a verse in which the Himalayas are referred to as a measuring-rod spanning the wide land from the east to the western sea-a metaphor suggesting that the culture developed in the Himalayan regions could serve as the measuring-rod of the cultures of the world.

***asty uttarasyam disi devatatma
himalayo nama nagadhirajah
purvaparau toyanidhi vagahya
sthitah prthivya iva manadandah***

The Himalayas are said by him to be the source of precious gems and medicinal herbs. His graphic descriptions of the Himalayan scenes read like those of one who has first-hand knowledge of this region. Another drama, written perhaps by a younger contemporary alidasa, the Mudrarakshasa, states that the empire of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya extended from the Himalayas to the southern ocean.

The Gupta empire was finally destroyed by the Huna invaders Central Asia, but their power was in turn broken by Yashodharman, king of Malwa, in about 530 A.D. The Mandasor pillar inscription says that his

authority was acknowledged over the vast area bounded by the Himalayas

Time became part of Ladakh, but promptly received back as part of the dowry on marrying the Tibetan commander's daughter. Ngari Khorsum was returned to Tibet, but the village of Minsar was retained. From about 1690, the gyalpos or chiefs of Ladakh began to pay tribute to the governors of Kashmir.

In Assam, the Hindu kings -the Varman, the Salastambha and the Pala dynasties-found themselves, from the eighth century onwards, under the pressure of the Ahoms, a branch of the Shan tribe. Finally, in 1228, the kingdom came under the rule of Chukupha, who is said to have been the first to assume for himself and his people the name of Ahom -"the peerless"- and to have given this name, now softened to Assam, to the country. The new rulers successfully resisted Moslem efforts to subdue them. In 1554, the Ahom ruler adopted the Hindu religion and changed his name, Chatamba, to Jaiyadhaja Singh. From then onwards, the Ahom kings always took Hindu names; and the Ahom Shans, adopting the language and customs as well as the religion of the conquered people, became absorbed in the Hindu fold. Aurangzeb sought to conquer Assam; but though the Ahom raja surrendered in 1662, he regained his territory four years later.

In the 18th century, European Powers entered the Indian political scene, but as they moved in from the sea-coasts, they did not at the beginning affect the northern frontier regions of India. Though the Mogul empire was disintegrating, central and northern India remained in Indian hands. The central sector of the Himalayan range was the boundary of the kingdom of Oudh, while west of it sprouted : small kingdoms, whose only visitors were pilgrims to Hindu shrines and whose chief article of commerce was ice for the courts. In 1801, Wellesley first thrust British influence into Oudh, and it gradually increased and culminated in annexation by Dalhousie in 1856. In the early years of the 19th century, the Gurkhas of Nepal had occupied Garhwal and the neighbouring hill states, and turning their attentions to the plains came into clash with the British. War dragged on for: three years, from 1813 to 1816, till the Gurkhas were finally defeated; and by the Treaty of Sagauli, the Raja of Nepal recognized British sovereignty over these border areas. In the Punjab, Ranjit Singh had set up a strong Sikh kingdom. In 1818-19, he occupied Kashmir, and between 1834 and 1841, Ladakh was conquered by Gulab Singh of Jammu, then a feudatory of the Sikhs, and annexed to his kingdom. In 1841, one of Gulab Singh's generals invaded western Tibet. He was defeated and expelled, but when the Tibetans, with the aid the Chinese, advanced to Leh, they were in their turn driven back. A peace treaty was signed in 1842. Four years later, Kashmir came under the suzerainty of the British. Gulab Singh was recognized as the Maharaja of the whole area, including Ladakh; but some months later, Spiti was

taken over by the British in exchange certain other territory, and added to Kulu district. The Punjab itself was finally annexed by the British in 1849. Assam was annexed in 1838. But in the north east and south there were numerous tribes over whom the Ahom rulers had gradually lost control. The British policy was one of acquiring loose political control over these areas, with the minimum of interference compatible with the protection of these tribesmen and restraining them from raiding either Indian or Chinese territory. Administration had gradually to be pushed up into these regions, and the frontier between Assam and Tibet ascertained. This was not just a question of political division. The tribesmen in the north-the Monbas, Akas, Daflas, Miris, Abors and Mishmis-were ethnically different from the Tibetans. Towang inhabited by the Monbas had been part of India for centuries and Tibetan influence had grown in it only since the nineteenth century.

The leaders of the Aka tribes bound themselves in 1842 and 1844, return for stipends, to maintain the peace. Over forty years later, 1883, they raided a forest office, and a military expedition was patched against them. They, however, only surrendered in 1888, and signed an Agreement under which their stipends were to be restored after a probation of two years. Thereafter, they kept the peace, and when Nevill visited the area in the winter of 1913-14, he found the rajas and people friendly. "The most excellent relations," he reported, "were established with the Akas. I believe this friendliness will be permanent". But less amenable from the start were the Daflas. Though they agreed informally in 1835, 1937 and 1852 to curb their raiding activities, they did not desist from attacking their law-tribesmen living on the plains. In 1874-75, the British sent a military force into the hills. There were no disturbances after that, t nor was their any Cordiality towards the British. When Nevill's mission visited the area in 1913, it was ill-received and he even opened fire on one occasion.

With the Miris and Abors, two tribes in close relation with each other, the British were at first on friendly terms. But there was a conflict in 1848 and a serious raid ten years later; and a British military expedition into the hills was turned back. A second expedition was sent the next year and the Abors overawed into submission. Three treaties were signed between November 1862 and January 1863, and a fourth in 1866, with various branches of the tribe. One curious feature of the agreements with the Abors was that the stipends were be in kind, of articles such as hoes and salt which could be distributed among the whole community. It was in a sense a recognition of the democratic nature of the Abor system of government. In 1893 they attacked an outpost, and in consequence an expedition was sent. It was by no means a success. The Abors were never really subdued, and in March 1911, an Assistant Political Officer who ventured into the area was murdered. Once more an expedition was sent to punish the Abors and exact reparation, and advantage was taken of the occasion to ascertain the frontier with Tibet.

In the north-eastern corner of India lived the Mishmi tribes. The British

concluded no written engagements with them, and despite numerous raids for long took no stricter measures than occasional blockades. In 1899, what Lord Curzon termed a "miniature army" was sent but with little result. In 1910, it was learnt that the Chinese had occupied Rima in Tibet, entered the Delei valley in country and planted their flag at Menilkrai also in Mishmi territory. The Assam Government therefore recommended that the Mishmi should be brought definitely under British control. A friendly Mission was sent in 1911, and as Tibetan settlements and influence were discovered round Walong, road-building was commenced and British administration carried into this area. The British, therefore, took nearly seventy-five years to secure the territory that had been formerly parts of Assam. But by 1912-13 the administration of this northern region of Assam had been established sufficiently to necessitate the formation of two large units, Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts. Sufficient information about the frontier had also been acquired to enable the definite delineation of the Assam-Tibet boundary. Throughout the tribal areas, whatever the difficulties of the British administrators, normally their problems were not complicated by the presence of Tibetan influence and control. Indeed, this broad survey of the frontier areas from the earlier days down to modern times shows that India's present northern frontier is along its whole stretch the historic frontier. Few, if any, land frontiers in the world can claim as strong a sanction of long and unbroken tradition.

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