

## **Travails of Border Trade**

*by Bhawan Singh Rawat*

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### **Laxman Singh Jangpangi, Padma Shri**

On January 25, 1959 Shri Laxman Singh Jangpangi, the then Indian Trade Agent, Gartok (Western Tibet), was in Almora, spending his well earned leave with his family. On the same day, the Northern Division of the Ministry of External Affairs was trying to contact him as the President had approved award of Padma Shri to him. Later in the evening when Republic Day 1959 honours list was announced his friends and colleagues started making enquiries from the Political Office in Sikkim regarding his whereabouts. From the next days, messages letters of congratulations started pouring in. In his letter, Shri S. Dutt, the then Foreign Secretary described the award of Padma Shri to Shri Jangpangi as a fitting recognition to his "selfless and strenuous work over a period of years under the most difficult conditions". Paying equally warm compliments to Shri Jangpangi, Padma Shri Apa B. Pant, Political Officer in Sikkim in his letter said that Shri Jangpangi's "hard and selfless work in the cause of the country has gained for him the gratitude and thanks of the country".

Shri J.S. Mehta, the then Director (China) and Shri S.K. Roy, Special Officer Frontier Area (SOFA) in the Ministry of External Affairs played important role in highlighting the work and sacrifices of Shri Jangpangi for due national recognition.

Shri S.K. Roy had visited Western Tibet in 1956 and had toured with Shri Jangpangi and team to the trade marts of Taklakote, Darchin, Gyanima and Gartok. He was the first senior Govt. of India Officer to visit Western Tibet.

He had gained first hand knowledge of the working conditions in Western Tibet. At the time of his departure for India via Shipki-Shimla route. Shri Roy described the Trade Agent and his staff as 'Super- Humans' to live and work under the most trying conditions in place like Western Tibet.

Shri J.S. Mehta (who later became Foreign Secretary) had been in touch with Shri Jangpangi's work and sent a letter of congratulations to him saying "There are very few civil servants in the country who have endured such hardships in discharge of their duties as you do on your annual trek to Western Tibet. Despite the rigours of the climate as well as the discomfort of living conditions, you have established a name for yourself and provided effective help to our people." For apparent reasons, Shri Mehta could not give more details of Shri Jangpangi's contributions particularly regarding his warning about the Chinese constructing a road through Indian territory of Aksai Chin.

Shri Jangpangi was the first person from the Kumaon hills to be honoured with the civilian award of Padma Shri in 1959. It was surprising that no politicians, organization or individuals from Kumaon took pride in a fellow-Kumaoni being honoured. On the other hand, Shri Bham Darshan, Member of Parliament from Garhwal had shown his affinity as a man from UP hill region by sending a letter of congratulations to Shri Jangpangi.

The investiture ceremony was held on 8th April 1959, when the President of India presented the insignia of Padma Shri to Shri Jangpangi.

### **Family Background**

Son of Rai Saheb Soban Singh, Shri Laxman Singh was born in Burfu in Johar Valley on 24th July, 1905. He belonged to a rich family. His grandfather, Phannu Jangpangi was awarded with a certificate of dagger and a medal by the British Government in recognition of his cooperation with the British administration. His father, Soban Singh was conferred upon the title

of 'Rai Saheb' for his services to British administration. As in 1930, Rai Saheb held considerable landed property paying a revenue of Rs. 200 (Rupees two hundred).

Shri Laxman Singh Jangpangi did his matriculation and Intermediate Science from Almora in 1926. He studied up to B.A. Final in Allahabad University.

### **Service Career**

Shri Jangpangi joined service in 1930 as an Accountant in British Trade Agency, Gartok (Western Tibet). The post of Accountant in the Trade Agency was of the second in command. He was given an officiating promotion as Trade Agent during the year 1941-42. He got his regular promotion as Trade Agent, Gartok in 1946 and remained in the post till 1959 when he was transferred to Indian Trade Agency, Yatung in Chumbi valley across Sikkim borders. He was the only Indian Officer who had traveled through five trade routes to Western Tibet-via Lipulekh pass, Unta Kungri-Bingri pass, Chor Hoti-Niti pass, Shimla-Shipki pass and Zojila- Taglungla pass.

### **Selection in IFS (B)**

The formation of IFS (B) had been delayed. It was finally constituted in 1956. Shri Jangpangi, a Sikkim cadre officer till then, was selected for IFS (B). Unfortunately, he did not have enough service to get promotion to higher rank or posting to better stations abroad. On superannuation, he was to retire at the age of 55 in 1960.

### **Posting to Yatung**

Shri Jangpangi was transferred to Indian Trade Agency, Yatung in December 1959. For the first time in his 29 years of service, he got a posting to a family station and expected to lead a relaxed life. He had a beautiful Government bungalow with a large apple and vegetable garden and a

spacious our house. (I visited Yatung in February 1960 to finalise our annual report on Western Tibet tour). But that was not to happen unfortunately. He was, at that stage faced with twin problems-he had been informed that he was on superannuation to retire in July 1960 and in the wake of Tibetan uprising of March 1969, Yatung area had become a hot bed of political activities and the Trade Agent was required to monitor the situation, which he did effectively.

Regarding the retirement, Shri Jangpangi was mainly worried about his children's education-his two daughters were still studying in high school in Lucknow and three sons were yet to get admission in good schools. He still had not decided about the place for post-retirement settlement. Govt. of India did grant him extension of service but in piece-meal manner. He finally retired three months after the closure of Trade Agencies in Tibet in June 1962. He temporarily shifted to Kalimpong and finally settled in Haldwani.

### **His life in 1930s and thereafter**

A few pages of his Tour Diaries of 1930 and 1937 are available. A perusal of these diaries gives the impression that he was physically and socially active. Those days British Trade Agency of Gartok (W. Tibet) was under the British Political Agent at Shimla and as such, the Trade Agent and Staff spent winter months at Shimla. Shri Jangpangi had a close circle of friends at Shimla and maintained contacts with respectable people of Rampur Buser and Ladakh. During tours of Western Tibet, he went out for hunting of barhal and spent leisure time playing chess, making rounds of the market and meeting acquaintances and relatives among the traders.

It seems there was a big change in him after his promotion as Trade Agent and transfer of his winter headquarters from Shimla to Gangtok (Sikkim). Over the period of five years, during which I worked under him in 1950s, I found him to be a loner. He avoided active social life. He had a few personal

friends like late Shri Diwan Singh Tolia and Shri Nirmal C. Sinha, Director, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok. The lack of company with intellectual compatibility during the long years of his posting in Tibet had added to physical hardship and discomfort. He was constantly worried about the education and future of his children.

### **A man of peaceful nature**

Shri Jangpangi was a man of peaceful nature. I never saw him lose temper or mouthing bad language against anyone. He remained calm and calculated even in adverse situation, though at times, personally speaking it caused irritation. He would never give an impression of being excited or happy over favourable developments nor would he easily get upset over adverse conditions. On October 21, 1959, I had gone to the Chinese Sub-office of Foreign Bureau with prior appointment to discuss some official matter. It was already dark. A colleague of mine carrying a petromax lamp accompanied me. As we approached the entrance of the Chinese Office, a Chinese armed guard showed a hostile posture, aiming his gun at me. My Chinese counterpart, whom I had come to meet, appeared at the gate after some time but did not behave properly. The meeting ended abruptly. I was clueless about the sudden change in the attitude of the Chinese who had hosted a sumptuous party for us earlier during the day. I was highly agitated and went straight to Shri Jangpangi's camp to report the incident. He listened to my story and tried to calm me down. He then said that the Chinese were apparently reacting to the border incident in Ladakh sector that took place that very day.

He had learnt about it through All India Radio news. He was not at all disturbed as I was, over the incident.

### **Caution-a personal trait**

Shri Jangpangi was cautious in his official and personal dealings. He would never take decisions or make commitments in haste. In dealing with the Chinese, even at social level, he was all the more careful and would always consider the pros and cons before taking up any matter with them. In 1958 we had entered Western Tibet via Shimla-Shipki route. We were stranded at Mayang village across Shipki pass for 3-4 days for want of animal transport. It was very hot during the day time, so along with a colleague went to Mayang Chu for a swim. We were surprised to find plenty of cold water trout in Mayang Chu. We called a couple of staff members and diverted a small branch of the river. We caught about four sacks full of fish. We passed on some fish to the Chinese guards accompanying us. When told about our giving of the fish to the Chinese, Shri Jangpangi expressed his displeasure over my action, saying that the Chinese will make an issue of it. Later, I was surprised how prophetic he was when during our first official meeting of the season at Gartok, the Chinese lodged a verbal protest over my action-catching fish and thereby hurting the religious sentiments of Tibetans.

During a visit to Namgyal Institute of Tibetology at Gangtok (Sikkim), one may see a small image of Avalokiteswara (Chatur-Bhuja) on display. This valuable artifact was presented to the institute by Shri Jangpangi in February 1963. According to Dr. Nirmal C. Sihna, Director of the Institute of Tibetology, also a close friend of Shri Jangpangi, the image was attracting the attention of lot of visitors.

### **His Spiced Tea**

Shri Jangpangi was fond of good food. He would prefer to have non-vegetarian items in his lunch or dinner. Two of our staff members were excellent cooks and skilled hunters, too. One of them worked with Shri Jangpangi. The 'Spiced tea' that Shri Jangpangi was used to, was much

talked about in our Political Office. So much so, that his Sikkimese colleagues would drop by his office on one pretext or the other during tea-time to share the "Spiced tea".

### **His passing away**

Shri Jangpangi passed away at Haldwani in 1976. He was not destined to see his children making progress in their respective careers and his eldest son, Shri Bala Singh the getting 'prestigious National Mineral Award'.

I had last met Shri Jangpangi at Haldwa in 1971, before I left for Eaghdad (Iraq.) As always, I pleaded with him to write his memoirs. To avoid the subject, he asked me to get him a good typewriter, first.