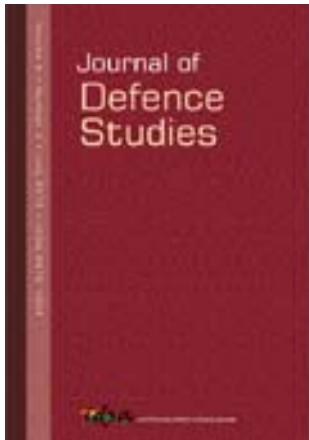


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Dibyesh Anand

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Remembering 1962 Sino-Indian Border War Politics of Memory

*Dibyesh Anand**

How does India remember the 1962 border war with China? The article argues that there are two ways in which the war is recalled in the country and both of them are betrayal narratives, one blaming the Chinese alone and the second blaming the Chinese expansionism as well as the naive leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The main focus of the article will be on a critical analysis of the three primary assumptions made by the betrayal narratives: the legitimacy of Indian claims; the unexpected Chinese aggression; and the singular failure of Indian political leadership. It will argue that these narratives prevent an honest evaluation of the military and diplomatic failure that contributed to the border war.

Near Sela Pass, enroute from the plains of Assam to the strategic town of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, lies a 'shrine' to Jaswant Baba. Jaswant Baba is no member of the pantheon of Hindu gods, but he is commemorated as a brave Indian soldier who died during 1962 war after holding off the invading Chinese troops for a few days. Military men as well as civilian tourists passing through make an obligatory stop at the 'shrine' to pay respect and remember the gallantry of some brave men during the otherwise disastrous China–India war. Very few

* Dr Dibyesh Anand is a Reader (Associate Professor) in International Relations at London's University of Westminster. He is the author of *Geopolitical Exotica: Tibet in Western Imagination* and *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear* in addition to several articles and papers. He is currently working on a book on China-India border dispute.



'pilgrims', soaking the religion of nationalism, question the veracity of the memory that the 'shrine' seeks to engender. That memory is, in fact, manufactured.¹

Several different stories are told about this putative figure. That he was Jaswant Singh Rawat (in some stories, he is mentioned as Jaswant Rana) of 4 Garhwal Rifles who fought the Chinese singlehandedly so well that, for three days, the Chinese thought they are fighting scores of Indians. He was helped by a beautiful local Monpa girl called Sela (in another version, she is named Bumla), after whom the pass was given the name after the war. Jaswant was killed, possibly betrayed by Sela's father, and the Chinese hung him or shot him, mutilated his body, cut off his head and took it back with them to China, but then the Chinese general was so impressed by his bravery that he sent back a bronze bust of Jaswant and it is this bust that lies in the 'shrine'. Military convoys that pass through have to make an obligatory stop here otherwise misfortune is supposed to befall on them. Going by most accounts found on the web, including on news sites,² Indian visitors and soldiers used to Bollywoodized nationalism lap up this fantasist story.

That Sela or Nuranang are very old Tibetanized names, well before India existed as a nation-state,³ or that there was no battle in the region in 1962 where the Indian Army, leave alone a single unit or an individual, fought for three days is completely ignored; the rout in Sela region was complete within a few hours on 17/18 November. There was a Jaswant Singh of Garhwal Rifles who along with his colleagues fought the Chinese for a couple of hours and received recognition posthumously (he received Maha Vir Chakra [MVC]), but it is only in recent years that the story has been embellished and created into a nationalist myth. Johri's is one of the first publicly available account to mention the incident.⁴ On 17 November, to silence the Chinese medium machine gun (MMG) attacking 4 Garhwal Rifles, Naib Subedar Udai Singh Rawat, the Platoon Commander, called for volunteers and got Lance Naik Jaswant Singh along with Rifleman Trilok Singh and Gopal Singh. They succeeded, but while returning, Trilok was killed, 'Jaswant Singh was also killed' and Gopal wounded. 'For this daring feat Jaswant Singh was awarded the MVC and Trilok Singh the VrC, both posthumous.'⁵ The official report too does not identify any conspicuous feat here as it says, '4 GARHWAL RIFLES withdrawal from the covering positions was uneventful'.

Similar examples of mythical stories of gallantry by individual soldiers and 'shrines' to them have mushroomed in the Himalayan borderlands of India. Why do I start with this nationalist myth? Because, such myths are not innocent but reflect a whitewashing of history. They are mere propaganda used by the elite to generate popular nationalism and prevent scrutiny of official policies that contributed to the war and the failure in it; they also start afflicting the decision makers themselves as most of them forget the harsh realities of the 1962 war. Those who ignore history are bound to be condemned by it and hence, to draw useful lessons from the disastrous border war, it is important that scholars raise uncomfortable question rather than assuage nationalist sentiments. This is what I do in this article. I do not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the border dispute, the 1962 war, the place of Tibet in it, Chinese role in the dispute, geopolitical environment or China–India relations;⁶ instead, the focus is narrow. It is to challenge the dominant ways in which the conflict is framed in the Indian public discourse.

The primary lens through which Indians view China, especially on the border issue, is of betrayal. The Chinese cannot really be trusted is almost a mantra in India. Understanding of contemporary events and dynamics of international relations between the two countries is almost always coloured through this lens that has its origin in the border dispute and 1962 war. The story has two strands: the first blames the Chinese alone;⁷ and the second blames the Chinese along with the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for his naive idealism and trusting the Chinese in the first place.⁸

These one-sided lenses through which China–India border dispute is seen would not have been worthy of study had they not continued to remain pervasive in the country. While some commentators adopt a more sophisticated view of the topic, the three primary ideas associated with the betrayal narratives—legitimacy of Indian claims, the unexpected Chinese aggression and the failure of Indian political leadership—continue to go unchallenged in much of pro-India scholarship. Writings that have questioned the Indian position are either rejected as pro-China, or selectively used to point out specific Indian failures without letting that cast doubt over its victim position or to explain away Indian actions as mere reactions to Chinese initiatives. However, there are serious flaws with these betrayal narratives and in this article, I analyse three key premises that are part of these narratives.

LEGITIMACY OF INDIAN CLAIMS

Indian nationalism has invested a sacrality to the territory of India, a phenomenon that has made negotiations over territories difficult and prone to accusations of bartering away something that is immutable and perennial. The Indo-Tibetan border has been presented as natural, historical and traditional. While there are three sectors of dispute, western, central and eastern, and the first diplomatic squabble started in the central sector in July 1954, the main theatres of conflict are the western sector (comprising of Aksai Chin and portions of Ladakh under Chinese control since 1950s) and the eastern sector (area to the south of McMahon Line that was designated *North-East Frontier Agency* (NEFA) and then Arunachal Pradesh under Indian control). The dispute became public and turned into a conflict first in the western sector where India accused China of not only occupying Indian territories in Aksai Chin but also building a highway there. Chinese rejected the charge and instead held India responsible for carrying on British imperialist frontier policy and taking over Chinese territories in the eastern sector, including the town of Tawang; Indians expressed incredulity and shock at this questioning of their historical frontier in the east.

There is, however, a serious problem with the Indian claims in the western sector. Aksai Chin belongs to India because there was a treaty in 1842 between Tibet and Kashmir through which the boundary of Tibet and Ladakh, a region culturally part of Tibetan Buddhist world, was affirmed. Since the state of Kashmir came under British Indian suzerainty and then under the sovereignty of India (and Pakistan), its territorial rights were inherited by India which claims the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir as Indian. British maps have been used extensively by India to assert its claim. However, on closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that there has never been a definite boundary line acceptable to various political actors—Tibetan and Kashmiri states, British, Russian and Chinese (Qing) empires—in that part of the world.⁹ Even the Tibet–Kashmir treaty of 1842 did not demarcate where the boundary lies but merely mentioned traditional boundary. Aksai Chin is unpopulated with extremely harsh terrain, while the disputed parts of Ladakh/Ngari are inhospitable for any moderately sized human settlement. Therefore, there was no imperative for the rulers of Kashmir, Tibet, China or British India to draw clear lines on the map or on the ground.

In fact, a study of British attitude towards the area shows how map making in the nineteenth century was intimately associated with various geopolitical, regional, local and bureaucratic factors. The proposed lines for boundary differed from map to map depending on the interest of the Raj and its officials at the time. For instance, the Ardagh Line that included Aksai Chin and is closest to the post-colonial Indian claim was drawn on the basis of a previous Johnson Line, and as Johnson was paid by the Dogra ruler in Kashmir, he went for the expansive Kashmiri claim.

The Macartney Line was relatively more conservative for it wanted to gain Qing Empire's support in order to keep the Russians as far away as possible from British India. The contours of the so-called Great Game at the turn of the nineteenth century meant that the British preferred to have a nominal Chinese-controlled territory between India and the Russian Empire. Since the Tibetan government refused to enter into diplomatic relations with the British, the latter relied upon China for geopolitical agreements based on the understanding that China was Tibet's suzerain. However, the Chinese refused to agree to even the 1899 Macartney Line and therefore, there was no international agreed boundary in the region. As Russian activities in Mongolia, Central Asia and Sinkiang waxed and waned and China underwent turmoil in the first half of the twentieth century, British maps started showing the Aksai Chin region as undefined but part of India. In fact, Indian maps until 1954 followed the British practice and included Aksai Chin in light yellow with the word 'Undefined'. In 1958, when the news of Chinese highway cutting across the land became public, India lodged a diplomatic protest. Nationalist hysteria prevented Indians from asking the important question: if this vast stretch of territory indeed belonged to India, why were there no Indians there since 1947 or why did years of road building by the Chinese go undetected? Instead, it was convenient to blame the Chinese for surreptitiously occupying Indian land. In fact, the Indian government did show some recognition of flexibility over its claims here, but as the tensions between the two sides increased, its public posturing left no room for compromise.

India's claim over NEFA is taken as given due to a history that is not without its problems.¹⁰ There is very little evidence of Indian civilization inroads into what the British called the Assam Himalayas. Even the ever-expansionist British usually saw the region as a buffer between Tibet and

Assam, one populated by hostile tribals or Tibetan Buddhist Monpas, especially in Tawang. While Indian maps naturalized McMahon Line soon after 1947, actual control over Tawang was asserted only in 1951. Indian claim is not based on this physical control but on the legitimacy of McMahon alignment. However, the Indian case is not as foolproof as it appears.

McMahon Line has its origin in 1913–14 tripartite Simla Conference between China, Tibet and Britain. The conference was held by the British to thrash out an agreement between Tibet and China over the boundary between Outer Tibet (nominally under Chinese suzerainty but administered completely by Lhasa government) and Inner Tibet (Tibetan-populated areas where Chinese writ would run); the Indo-Tibetan boundary alignment under which Tawang tract and other tribal areas of Assam Himalayas came under British Indian jurisdiction was successfully negotiated in secret between the British and Tibetans during the conference. The Convention resulted in a map where a blue line was used to distinguish Tibetan-administered area from Tibetan-populated but Chinese-administered area (that is Outer Tibet from Inner Tibet), whereas a red line was used to show the limits of Tibetan ethnic area. The red line not only marked out Tibetan areas from rest of China, it was also extended in the south to distinguish it from British India, even though this was never an explicit part of the conference remit—this extension put Tawang and the rest of tribal areas to the south of Indo-Tibetan boundary, and hence part of India. Indians argue that the Indo-Tibetan boundary alignment (that subsequently came to be known as McMahon Line from 1930s) is valid because the Chinese representative agreed to it by signing, but the Chinese republican government of the time then refused to ratify it because of their disagreement over Inner–Outer Tibet; that is, since the criticisms of Chinese government at the time were directed against the boundary between Inner and Outer Tibet (blue line) and not against Indo-Tibetan boundary (part of the red line), Chinese government's rejection of the McMahon Line from 1959 onwards was a shocking turnaround.

Indian claim about the validity of McMahon Line is not as strong as it is made out to be.¹¹ Simla Conference was perceived as a failure by all the three actors at the time because of the Chinese refusal to agree; it was only in late 1930s, especially under the initiative of Olaf Caroe, that the McMahon Line was resuscitated. British attempts to get Lhasa

government to reaffirm its obligations flowing out of Simla came to naught as Tibetans argued that their giving up of Tawang was tied to the British success in getting China to agree to Tibet's status and since the British failed in getting Chinese on board, Tawang tract remained very much part of Tibetan administration. The British offer of realigning McMahon Line so as to give back Tawang to Lhasa in return for Tibetan acceptance of the alignment in rest of the region was never taken up as the World War II approached. The British made a few attempts during the later stages of the war to extend their administration in the said area but Tawang remained firmly tied to Lhasa via Tsona. Tawang tract upto Sela Pass was part of the Tsona district of Tibet, it was inhabited mostly by Monpas who followed Tibetan Buddhism, the Tawang monastery collected taxes and dues for its parent Drepung monastery of Lhasa (one of the 'big three'), Tawang monks also collected taxes and dues from villages south of Se La, prominent Tibetan aristocratic families owned private estates in different parts of Assam Himalayas and, most importantly, residents of the region were unaware that they had become part of India. Soon after India's independence, in October 1947, the Lhasa government requested the new Indian government to return its territories. While some accounts suggest that local Monpas were not offended when Indians took control over Tawang in February 1951, especially since it meant reduction of heavy taxation burden, it was also a period when Tibet was facing an imminent Chinese invasion and the Tibetan government was hoping for Indian support; an absence of loud opposition from Tibetans therefore is not surprising. However, local Tibetan officials and lamas continued to seek to collect their dues at least until mid-1950s.¹²

By not coming to the aid of Tibetans against the *People's Liberation Army* (PLA), by preventing any international condemnation of China over its actions, by doing nothing to protect Tibetan autonomy and finally, by giving up all 'special' rights in the 'Tibetan region of China' through 1954 agreement, India had no moral or legal basis for claiming the legitimacy of Simla Conference. It was trying to have its cake and eat it to—do nothing to challenge China and, in fact, bending backwards to recognize Chinese control over Tibet and yet claim that Tibetans had a right to sign an international agreement delineating their boundaries. As the Chinese argued, Tibet had no international identity to sign a treaty and it was in recognition of this (as well as of 1907 agreement between Britain and Russia where Britain had accepted the condition that Tibet's

foreign affairs will be dealt with only through China) that the British had insisted on Chinese presence during the actual conference. ‘The legitimacy of India’s position regarding the Aksai Chin was a doubtful non-starter, but the logic of the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement meant that India’s claim to the McMahon Line stood challenged, undermined’.¹³ British knew that without an explicit Chinese agreement, there could be no legitimate boundary making. While pretending to be ‘neutral’, British and Tibetans had conspired as the 26/27 March 1914 agreement between McMahon and Lochen Shatra that drew Indo-Tibetan boundary was kept a secret from the Chinese representative, Ivan Chen. And later, in April, Chen was tricked into initialing a map of the draft convention that contained this new redrawn Indo-Tibetan boundary—he had never been informed that the conference was about anything other than the nature and extent of Chinese influence in Tibet. McMahon’s scheming had a long-term consequence as it shaped post-colonial India’s notion of where the boundary lay, but in the short term, there was no attempt made by the British to revise their map or to extend their administration into Assam Himalayas. Charles Bell, part of McMahon’s delegation and an official close to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, in his book on Tibet may have been the first British official to include a map that showed boundary of Tibet as lying to the north of Tawang (that is, following the McMahon alignment),¹⁴ but another map drawn in the same book showed the boundary to the south of Tawang—thus, this was no attempt to make real the new realignment.

As mentioned earlier, when—under new pressures from temporarily resurgent nationalist China—Olaf Caroe persuaded his seniors to reaffirm the Indo-Tibetan boundary McMahon had secured through Simla, it was done without any fanfare. In fact, the British government in London was keen on avoiding publicity regarding this move to change maps in case Tibetans or Chinese were encouraged to protest. Aitchison, in his authoritative collection of treaties, had written off Simla as a failure¹⁵; however, the government recalled all the recent editions (1929) back, rewrote the section on Simla in a manner that validated the Convention as effective and sent the new versions back in 1938, but retained the publication date of 1929.¹⁶

Tibetans, too, refused to accept the McMahon Line as legitimate. For instance, in 1944, in a strongly worded protest, they said:

The Sino-Tibetan question is being negotiated with the Govt. of India as the intermediary and it is not yet been settled, besides the territories mentioned above have not yet been shown as having been included within the Indian territory in the treaty...[If British troops do not withdraw from Kalaktang and Walung] it will look something like a big insect [sic] eating a small one and thereby the bad name of the Government of India will spread out like the wind....¹⁷

Therefore, McMahon Line was neither fully legitimate nor was the alignment reflective of any effective control on the ground. Post-colonial India faced a serious challenge of nation and state building and in comparison to the problems resulting from partition, formation of Pakistan and the imbroglio in Kashmir, the frontier regions of Assam Himalayas were seen as less important. But within a decade of the declaration of independence, tensions surfaced and conflict emerged there. Indian adopted a sacral–moral–legalistic approach to territory. While this is understandable on account of the scar of partition, specificity of Indian nationalism and personality of Nehru, it was self-harming as India dealt with a neighbour with competing claims over the same territory. Had the Indian leadership of 1950s shown more understanding of the ambiguous legacy of British Raj, and therefore the need to be politically more mature and flexible, we may not have been talking of China–India border dispute.

THE (UN)EXPECTED CHINESE AGGRESSION?

The adoption of a moral–legalistic vocabulary, instead of a political language of accommodation, naturalized the boundary claims in the public imagination of Indians. Since the leadership, except for occasional utterances which were drowned by the cacophony of opposing voices, presented the Indian case as ‘all we claim is rightfully ours’, the only way in which the Chinese intentions and actions could be read was as ‘malevolent aggression’. There was no thorough investigation after the 1962 debacle that became public, and the government found it easier to ascribe the dispute to Chinese duplicity and the conflict to unexpected Chinese aggression. Nehru/India was portrayed as naively trusting and therefore, ill-prepared to face the Chinese in a border war.

However, a closer and more honest look at Indian actions before 1962 challenges this myth of Chinese action and Indian (non)reaction. Not only did India take over Tawang and extend administration and border outposts to areas it lay claim over, it refused to acknowledge there was any dispute. India was fully aware of the problematic nature of claims in the western sector and conscious that Chinese/Tibetans did not accept McMahon Line in the eastern sector. The contention that Indian leadership genuinely believed that the boundary was settled is faulty. For instance, Mehra argues that ‘the Chinese are said to be taciturn, Indians garrulous; Chinese matter-of-fact, Indians legalistic; Chinese methodical, Indians casual. It was this approach which led Indians to believe that in 1954, China had agreed to go along with their version of the border’.¹⁸ Mehra conveniently ignored the simple fact that it was Nehru who made a conscious decision in 1954, unilaterally and without the Parliament backing or Cabinet discussion, to cartographically represent all Indian claims as firm and without qualifications. In 1950, the Survey of India had published the first official map of independent India showing ‘Political Divisions in the New Republic’ and here, McMahon Line alignment was shown as ‘undemarcated’ and in the western and middle sectors was a ‘colour-wash with the legend “Boundary Undefined”’.¹⁹

On 1 July 1954, Nehru gave a 17-point memorandum with clear directive to withdraw and destroy all other maps, show no lines or ambiguity, and ordered that ‘this frontier should be considered a firm and definite one which is not open to discussion with anybody’.²⁰ Surely, this implies he was aware that the cartographical representation of India was based on a claim that was not agreed internationally. A few years later, when the dispute blew up, he claimed to be shocked. Chinese were accused of aggression, while Indian position was presented as non-negotiable, especially in the eastern sector. In the western sector, Nehru did show some signs of flexibility over Indian claims, but that evaporated as the relations worsened. Both the countries used military and paramilitary forces to extend effective control, or at least symbols of authority, through border posts in areas they claimed. Indians were active in making real, on the ground, the claims on the map wherever they could but hid that from public scrutiny until 1959—this contributed to the erroneous view that the Chinese had caught India unawares.

Indian intelligence, military as well as diplomatic, took rather active steps, especially since 1959, to push filling up the empty space. In the

eastern sector, not only did India insist on the validity of McMahon Line, but it also sought to modify that line on the ground when it was found that McMahon Line in practice, in some places, was a short distance south of the watershed. Indian justification for trying to install posts north of cartographical McMahon Line was that it was in the spirit, if not the letter, of alignment since the Line was supposed to follow watershed principle. However, there is no evidence from Simla Conference of 1914 to suggest that watershed principle was the defining element of McMahon Line when the Anglo-Tibetan negotiations had taken place in 1914. This unilateral move by India on the ground, accompanied by moral-legalistic argument in the public, prevented Indians from seeing the potentially aggressive ethos of their entire approach. When Zhou gave clear hints of Chinese openness to negotiate the entire boundary in the spirit of mutual accommodation, India rejected it as if the Chinese were wrong in questioning the Indian claim. When China successfully negotiated with Burma and converted *de facto* border (extension of the McMahon Line) into an agreed boundary, presenting it as based on contemporary realities, India saw it as a ploy to make it look bad. What it ignored was that China-Burma boundary was a 'post-Imperialist treaty-making'²¹ and not an affirmation of imperialist cartography, something being offered to India too during Zhou's visit in 1960. Behind the diplomatic posturing lay attempts, made by both the countries, to extend their border outposts.

A close study of Indian activities in the disputed regions in the western and eastern sectors since 1959 challenges the myth of Indian benign inaction and at the very least, presents a picture of conflict where no one side was exclusively aggressive. The 1962 war was one where Chinese military routed India in the eastern sector and made some gains in the western sector. The war started on 20 October 1962 and ended with unilateral ceasefire declared by China on 21 November, and China withdrew from the entire NEFA region it had won in the war. Surely, China was therefore not a pacifist power. However, this war did not take place out of blue but was preceded by three years of building tension, rising conflict and diplomatic impasse to which India contributed a fair share. As scholars have pointed out, the decision of Chinese leaders to go for a war was not made before late summer 1962 and this followed two years of build-up by both sides.²²

An important role was played by India's 'Forward Policy' which the Chinese perceived as provocative coming on top of India's role in

fomenting the rebellion on Tibet. ‘Public governmental reactions to Chinese statements highlighted their aggressive intent, while privately the “forward policy” was justified as a no-risk action which would not meet any serious Chinese resistance.’²³ Neville Maxwell has argued that 1962 war was a punitive expedition of China against Indian aggression.²⁴ Various historical and contemporary evidences he has marshaled to point out Indian provocations and Indian obstinacy have mostly gone unchallenged. Even scholars who focus more on the details of Chinese and Indian decision making²⁵ do not discount the crucial role played by Indian ‘Forward Policy’ in contributing to the final decision to punish India. ‘China’s inability to arrest India’s forward policy through diplomacy and deterrence ultimately led to the decision to launch a large-scale offensive in October.’²⁶ Garver argues that ‘both sides bear onus for the 1962 war, China for misconstruing India’s Tibetan policies, and India for pursuing a confrontational policy on border.’²⁷

The fact that China withdrew from most of the areas it had occupied after defeating India thoroughly discounts the notion of China as an expansionist power; aggressive maybe, but not expansionist. While rejecting McMahon Line as illegitimate product of British imperialism, China withdrew north of it after its unilateral ceasefire, and even during the war there, it avoided ridges that fell under Bhutan. Clearly, the intention was to punish India and not a result of inherent Chinese expansionism or communist aggressiveness.

SINGULAR FAILURE OF INDIAN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP?

War and peace are ultimate responsibility of the government of the day. Therefore, the setbacks of 1962 war were primarily the responsibility of Prime Minister Nehru. However, Indian leadership of the time sought to explain away its defeat in the hands of Chinese military as resulting from surprise. The betrayal narrative prevented a serious re-evaluation of the causes of conflict and the military defeat. But many commentators have, since 1962, recognized that India was failed by its civilian political leadership. Nehru did not pay close attention to military preparedness because of his idealism and faith in *Hindi–Chini bhai-bhai* doctrine. Defence Minister Krishna Menon was blamed for being an anti-military leftist intellectual and filling the army leadership with ‘courtier generals’. Such views are especially common amongst right-wing parties and security hawks. However, a close analysis of Indian decision making before 1962

shows that while political leadership had clearly failed to prevent the war, it was the military leadership at all levels that finally lost the war. A curious mix of arrogance, ignorance, fatalism, defeatism and confusion amongst commanders at all levels—Delhi, command and field—in the eastern sector is what led to the rapid loss of territory there. In contrast, western sector suffered a reverse but not a rout, primarily due to better leadership there.

Writings of historians and scholars like Maxwell as well as that of some retired military officials give the impression that the primary problem here was political interference in military affairs. Srinath Raghavan has challenged this view and reminded that the entire military machinery failed in NEFA: ‘The fundamental problem was that they had no alternatives to offer, no unanimous professional judgement that applied to the situation. Criticism of top military commanders for not “standing up” to civilians—a recurrent theme in writings on the war largely misses the point.’²⁸ Earlier, Saigal had written:

After the debacle of 1962, certain vested interests insured the total blackout of a factual account of the events to the Press and the public. They tried to put the entire blame on the politicians—claiming that they had neglected the Services’ requirements, or brought politics into promotions to higher ranks.²⁹

It was conveniently ignored that army leaders offered no alternative.³⁰ Not only did the ‘courtier generals’ like B.M. Kaul show a remarkable lack of meaningful leadership, even hitherto respected field commanders like A. Pathania focused on retreating rather than fighting, without a clear plan of how to use the retreat strategically to consolidate. General L.P. Sen, heading the Eastern Command, boasted to the Political Officer, Nari Rustomji, during the lull between the two phases of the war:

We’ve got those bastards where we want them now. Just let them move one step forward, and they’ll get such a thrashing they’ll never forget. Our boys are now in positions where they can fight and show what they’re worth. They’re just itching for a chance to have a real good crack at the Chinks [*sic*].³¹

But when the Chinese offensive began, Sen failed to provide any meaningful leadership. There are plenty of such accounts of empty bravado by army officials during the war if one reads through various unpublicized works by those who experienced the war directly.

As the official report on the military debacle as well as a published official history of the war show, contrary to the general view that Chinese victory was primarily due to overwhelming numerical superiority, the main reason for rapid defeat in the eastern sector was the collapse of command and control.³² In fact, a day before the Chinese announced unilateral ceasefire, the corps command was scrambling as fast as the civilian administration to withdraw from Tezpur on the foothills of NEFA. On 19 November, Nehru gave a speech that was read as a message of abandonment by the Assamese; Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri talked of blowing up oil wells in Assam; and American Ambassador Galbraith noted that 20 November ‘was the day of ultimate panic in Delhi, the first time I have ever witnessed the disintegration of public morale’.³³ The army had failed completely.³⁴

The systemic problem within the army and its role in the fledgling post-colonial Indian democracy are matters that deserve more attention than is possible in this article. More research needs to be done to locate the defeat of the Indian Army in the context of systemic flaws internal to the army as well as in its relation to the wider body politic. Indian Army and its regimental system, the widespread ethos in the officer corps privileging empty pomposity,³⁵ the gulf between the officers and the soldiers, the legacy of the British Raj mentality that made the army see itself as distinct from nationalists, the delay in Indianization of the army (as opposed to the other branches of bureaucracy),³⁶ etc., need to be further investigated by military historians. ‘The Army culture had suddenly taken the connotation of a combination of boasting about the past performance of the unit, taking this as axiomatic that its future performance would also be of the same high order and that military performance depended upon a hard-drinking, hard-playing officer cadre.’³⁷ The collapse of the relevant units at Sela during the war has been recognized as the worst reverse suffered by Indian Army, but what experts know, but is unknown to the public, is that the 17–18 November withdrawal of the brigade guarding Sela Pass started even before the Chinese onslaught began; the collapse of the brigade was a result of fear and confusion amongst the commanders. ‘The command and the central structure of a force of over 15000 troops, responsible for defending over 20000 square kilometres of our territory, was paralysed in a matter of minutes and thus the war was lost *unfought* at about 0600 hours on 18 November 1962.’³⁸

The most interesting question that emerges from the study of Forward Policy is that it was based on a hypothesis—Chinese will not

retaliate. While some writers from military background have laid the entire blame on the door of another confidante of Nehru, B.N. Mullik, the Chief of Intelligence Bureau, as the official report makes it clear, even the military top brass planned their move on the assumption that the Chinese will not respond militarily. Military appreciations that warned of Chinese retaliation were completely ignored by the top brass. Agreeing to and implementing a forward policy in a frontier zone disputed with a militarily stronger country, without adequate preparation, on the belief that the enemy will not respond robustly should go down in the annals of Indian military history as nothing short of a disaster. Often, during strategic decision making, political leadership left it to the military to come up with answers.

A good illustration of how it was the Army Headquarters (HQ) and not only the civilian leaders who mishandled the militarization of the border is when without any explanation, the HQ ordered the Western Command to create more border posts in December 1961 (as agreed to in a meeting on 2 November 1961 with the political leadership) but removed an important condition that had been agreed upon in the meeting (backup with a concentration of troops). The clause (c) that was removed stated: 'In view of numerous operational and administrative difficulties, efforts should be made to position major concentration of forces along our borders in places conveniently situated behind the forward posts from where they can restore a border situation at short notice.'

There is no evidence that the prime minister or the defence minister was kept in loop about this omission by the military commanders. Thus, the implementation of the 'Forward Policy' was consciously carried out by the military leadership without the necessary backing as ordered by the government.³⁹ That the military leaders were willing to send troops out without appropriate preparation and not keeping the government fully informed was militarily indefensible and ethically unsound. 'The Army took on a task knowing fully well that it could not be carried out.'⁴⁰ The excuse that civilian supremacy prevented military commanders from challenging the militarily unsound Forward Policy does not work. As Praval points out, 'there was nothing to stop those in authority from following the normal procedure for undertaking a military operation; and in case an appreciation by the field commander showed that it had no chance of success, the civil authority should have been told'.⁴¹ The principle of civilian supremacy still leaves the prerogative of resignation. Not a single commander involved in the build up to the war took a

principled stance and resigned. They willingly shoved their men into a confrontation.

CONCLUSION

The betrayal narratives may assuage nationalist sentiments in India but prevent serious questions about the problematic validity of Indian boundary claims, the dominant picture of Chinese aggression and Indian innocence and the notion that it was primarily a fault with democratic decision making that left the military unprepared. Indian leadership of the time failed diplomatically, militarily and politically, and the defeat in 1962 war was a result of that. The only success was in preventing any serious scrutiny of the causes and the conduct of war and in keeping the public mostly unaware. Fifty years on from the disastrous border war, are Indians prepared to shun these self-harming narratives and carry out an honest reappraisal of policies and practices that transformed a manageable disagreement into a full-blown border dispute?

NOTES

1. See also Gautam, P.K., *The Need for Renaissance of Military History and Modern War Studies in India*, New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), 2011, p. 28.
2. See, for instance, *The Times of India*, '1962 War Braveheart is Tawang Deity', 21 April 2008, available at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-04-21/india/27754102_1_sino-indian-border-tawang-soldiers, accessed on 10 August 2012.
3. Another local girl, Nura, is mentioned as assisting the couple and after her, a local waterfall was called Nuranang (today, it is called Madhuri falls by Indian military men after Bollywood actor of 1990s, Madhuri Dixit). The practice of appropriating local names and creating stories around it remind us of colonial modes of dealing with the lands and peoples they explore and conquer. The local responses to such writing over of a nationalist story over their body politic include ignorance, amusement, frustration and anger.
4. Johri, Sita Ram, *Chinese Invasion of NEFA*, Lucknow: Himalaya, 1968.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18. 'No doubt the Garhwalis fought bravely and earned praise for the battalion from the IV Corps Commander, but the way the unit effected its withdrawal left much to be desired...The Garhwalis had enough

- ammunition but no spirit and strength to fight. They were hungry and tired' (Ibid., p. 123).
6. For comprehensive treatment of the dispute, see *China Report*, Special Issue on China–India Border Dispute, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2011; Garver, John W., *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001; Garver, John W., 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962', in Robert S. Ross and Alastair Iain Johnston (eds), *New Approaches to the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, available at <http://chinaindiaborderdispute.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/garver.pdf>, accessed on 10 August 2012; Hoffmann, Steven A., *India and the China Crisis*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; Maxwell, Neville, *India's China War*, London: Penguin, 1972; and Noorani, A.G., *India–China Boundary Problem, 1846–1947: History and Diplomacy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
 7. See, for example, Chakravarti, P.C., *India–China Relations*, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961; Karnik, V.B. (ed.), *China Invades India*, Bombay: Allied, 1963; Menon, V.K. Krishna, *India and the Chinese Aggression*, Bombay: Contemporary, 1963; Rao, Gondker Narayana, *The India–China Border: A Reappraisal*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1968; and numerous publications that came out of Publications Division in 1962 and 1963. Instead of investigation of what went wrong, government leaders such as the Defence Minister Krishna Menon misled the country by ascribing the defeat of the army to the overwhelming numbers and strategies of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). 'The Chinese have got guns behind and guns in front. Therefore, these masses of men have no choice, but to hurl themselves forward.... They are accustomed to that and take a very detached view of life' (Menon, *India and the Chinese Aggression*, pp. 36–7).
 8. Criticism referred to how Nehru and his coterie sold out Tibet first, then failed to squeeze any concession on the border before signing the 1954 agreement, hid evidence of Chinese territorial aggrandizement as long as they could, neglected defence, did not match that diplomatic posturing with military preparedness and led Indians straight into a humiliating defeat. India's post-independence civilian leadership thus betrayed India.
 9. See Lamb, Alistair, *The China–India Border: The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964; Lamb, Alastair, *The Sino-Indian Border in Ladakh*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973; Noorani, *India–China Boundary Problem*.
 10. See Lamb, Alastair, *The McMahon Line: A Study in the Relations Between India China and Tibet, 1904 to 1914, Vol 1*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966a and *The McMahon Line: A Study in the Relations Between India*

- China and Tibet, 1904 to 1914, Vol II*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966b.
11. Gupta, Karunakar, 'The McMahon Line 1911–45: The British Legacy', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 47, July–September 1971, pp. 521–45.
 12. As an extract from personal letter dated 17 March 1951 from the Political Officer in Sikkim to the Indian Trade Agent, Yatung, Tibet, mentions: 'Incidentally, I have been informed that our Officers are having great difficulty in obtaining porters, etc., because the Tawang people do not accept Indian rupees and want to be paid only in the Tibetan Betang or Trangka.'
 13. Singh, Amar Jasbir, 'The Tibetan Problem and China's Foreign Policy', in Surjit Mansingh (ed.), *Indian and Chinese Foreign Policies in Comparative Perspective*, New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1998, p. 267.
 14. Bell, Charles, *The People of Tibet*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928.
 15. Aithchison, C.U., *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries, Vol XIV*, Calcutta: Government of India, 1929.
 16. It is not clear whether the Indian government in 1950s was aware of this 'backdating' by Olaf Caroe; this was revealed in 1963 by an ex-British diplomat, J.M. Addis, while doing his research in Harvard library where he found an original copy of 1929 edition and discovered the discrepancy. See Addis, J.M., *The India–China Border Question*, Cambridge, MA: Centre for International Affairs, 1963, available at <http://chinaindiaborderdispute.wordpress.com>, accessed on 10 August 2012.
 17. Goldstein, Melvyn C., *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. 416.
 18. Mehra, Parshotam, *Essays in Frontier History: India, China, and the Disputed Border*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 5.
 19. Sinha, Mira, 'China: Making and Unmaking of Nehru's Foreign Policy', *China Report*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1979, p. 62.
 20. Noorani, *India–China Boundary Problem*, p. 223.
 21. Lamb, Alastair, *The McMahon Line: A Study in the Relations Between India China and Tibet, 1904 to 1914, Vol. 2*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966b, p. 583.
 22. Fravel, M. Taylor, 'Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes', *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2007, pp. 44–83.
 23. Whiting, Allen S., *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1975, p. 49.
 24. Maxwell, *India's China War*.

25. Garver, *Protracted Contest*; Graver, 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962'; Hoffmann, Steven A., 'Rethinking the Linkage Between Tibet and the China-India Border Conflict', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2006, pp. 165–94.
26. Fravel, Taylor M., *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 184.
27. Garver, 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962', p. 3.
28. Raghavan, Srinath, 'A Bad Knock: The War with China, 1962', in Daniel P. Marston and Chandar S. Sundaram (eds), *A military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era*, London: Praeger Security International, 2007, p. 161.
29. Saigal, J.R., *The Unfought War of 1962: The NEFA Debacle*, Bombay: Allied, 1979, p. 130.
30. Even an army chief feted by security hawks as standing up to the defence minister had confessed in July 1962, 'I cannot even as a soldier envisage India taking on China in an open conflict on its own...It must be left to the politicians and diplomats to ensure our security' (Thimayya, cited in Raghavan, Srinath, 'Civil–Military Relations in India: The China Crisis and After', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2009, p. 154).
31. Rustomji, Nari Kaikhosru, *Enchanted Frontiers: Sikkim, Bhutan and India's North-Eastern Borderlands*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 281.
32. Sinha, P.B. and P.B. Athale, 'History of the Conflict with China, 1962', edited by S.N. Prasad, New Delhi: History Division of the Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992.
33. Bhutani, Sudarshan, *A Clash of Political Cultures: Sino-Indian Relations (1957–1962)*, New Delhi: Roli Books, 2004, p. x.
34. 'Never in the history of warfare has a well-organized, trained, and fairly well-equipped force with a fire power much superior to that of the enemy, and consisting of over 15000 seasoned soldiers deployed in an advantageous position to defend their country disintegrated in a matter of minutes without a fight' (Saigal, *The Unfought War of 1962*, p. xiv).
35. Ibid. 'Behind the facade of peacetime ceremonials and nicely kept messes, however, there was a certain hollowness. Appearances came to mean a great deal more than reality' (Praval, K.C., *Indian Army after Independence*, New Delhi: Lancer Paperbacks, 1978, p. 147).
36. See Praval, *Indian Army after Independence*.
37. Sodhi, H.S., *Top Brass: A Critical Appraisal of the Indian Military Leadership*, Noida: Trishul, 1993, pp. 41–2.

38. Saigal, *The Unfought War of 1962*, p. 74.
39. Later, the then Army Chief, Thapar, excused Army HQ action saying that such a build-up would have taken a long time, and by then the Chinese would have occupied considerable parts of Indian territory (Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p. 99).
40. Sodhi, *Top Brass*, p. 39.
41. Praval, *Indian Army after Independence*, p. 187.