



The Indian checkposts, Lipu Lekh, and Kalapani

A resolution to the disputed territory along Nepal's northern boundary will come only when India and China agree to demarcate their border

by **Sam Cowan** | Monday December 14, 2015

In his book *Border Management of Nepal*, Buddhi Narayan Shrestha states that “Indian Armed military-men of the Indian Military Check-posts, deputed on 9 June 1952 in the northern frontier of Nepal, were put away and sent back to India by the Government of Nepal on 20 April 1969” (259). This article examines the political and security contexts that led to

the deployment of these foreign soldiers and police officers on Nepali soil. It will include detail about the checkpoints given in the accounts of early foreign travelers who encountered them in various remote places. The vexed disputes between Nepal and India over Lipu Lekh and Kalapani will also be examined. The great scoop comes at the end.

Buddhi Narayan Shrestha's dates for the deployment and withdrawal of the checkpoints need treating with care. We can be more certain about the withdrawal timescale because of detail given in Rishikesh Shaha's book *Nepali Politics: Retrospect and Prospect*. It gives extracts of an exclusive interview that Nepal's then prime minister, Kirti Nidhi Bista, gave to the official English language daily, *The Rising Nepal*, on June 25, 1969. In it he stated, no doubt at the behest of King Mahendra, that since India had not consulted Nepal either at the time of the 1962 Sino-Indian armed conflict or during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, the commitments with regard to mutual security based on the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship had fallen into disuse and by the same token were no longer binding on either party (Shaha, 130). He expressed Nepal's resentment of the term "special relationship" and stressed that "Nepal could not compromise its sovereignty for India's so called security." A specific demand was made for "the immediate withdrawal both of the Indian 'wireless operators' from the checkpoints on the Nepal-China border and of the Indian Military Liaison Group." The Indian Ministry of External Affairs initially pretended not to take notice of this interview, with a spokesman inviting a formal communication from the Government of Nepal on the subject. Eventually after much diplomatic sparring, during which India threatened to close the border, an agreement was reached in September 1969 to withdraw the checkpoints by August 1970. Significantly, Nepal did not insist on scrapping the 1950 treaty.

A well-sourced and widely carried [Associated Press report](https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1873&dat=19691229&id=55QeAAAAIBAJ&sjid=gcsEAAAAIBAJ&pg=2850,6804556&hl=en) (<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1873&dat=19691229&id=55QeAAAAIBAJ&sjid=gcsEAAAAIBAJ&pg=2850,6804556&hl=en>) from Delhi, dated December 29, 1969, confirms that the agreement to withdraw the checkpoints was generally adhered to. The report states correctly that the Indians were stunned to get the request to remove the 17 checkpoints, but that seven posts were evacuated in December 1969 and that "the evacuation of nine remaining border watchposts" would take place during 1970. (One checkpoint may have been withdrawn earlier and although most sources refer to 18 checkpoints, it is possible that one initially planned was not deployed, though there are some indications that at one stage the number might have gone up to 20.)

The deployment dates of the checkpoints are more problematic. Buddhi Narayan Shrestha states, "This happened during the premiership of Matrika Prasad Koirala, beginning 9 June 1952, at 18 checkpoints of the Nepalese frontier. In each of these checkpoints, 20 to 40 Indian

army personnel equipped with arms and communication equipment were deployed, together with a few Nepali army and civilian officials. The Indian army deployment was completed in two trips to Nepal” (51). Buddhi Narayan Shrestha gives no reference to support his statement on the composition of the checkposts or the June 9, 1952 deployment date. He is also vague about the specific authorization for the deployment of the checkposts, linking it simply to the well-known [letter of Sardar Patel to Nehru \(http://www.vigilonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1142&Itemid=1\)](http://www.vigilonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1142&Itemid=1) of November 7, 1950. Patel was the Indian home minister at the time. He was a charismatic and powerful character who played a leading role in the fight for Indian independence. In 1946, at the request of Gandhi, he stood aside to allow Nehru to be elected Congress president and hence, on August 15, 1947, to become the first prime minister of an independent India. He died on December 15, 1950 and knew that he was terminally ill when he wrote his impressive and comprehensive letter. It was aimed at alerting Nehru to the new military threat facing India following the Chinese Army’s incursion into Tibet and to stress to him the need for India to take immediate wide-ranging actions to counter it, including in Nepal.

No separate secret protocol authorized the deployment of the checkposts, but Clause 1 of the secret exchange of letters attached to the 1950 treaty (made public in 1959) did state that “neither government shall tolerate any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor. To deal with any such threat, the two governments shall consult with each other and advise effective counter-measures.” That was a convenient cover, retrospectively applied I believe, for India’s actions. Many years ago I asked a retired senior Royal Nepal Army officer about the subject. He simply said that the Indians just did it and there was nothing Nepal could do about it. Research indicates that this was an accurate assessment. The prevailing political and security contexts help to explain how such a state of affairs existed.

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In the area of politics, an agreement brokered by India in Delhi on February 8, 1951 effectively ended 104 years of Rana rule. King Tribhuvan and his family returned in triumph from their three-month exile on February 15, 1951. The last Rana maharaja, Mohan Shumsher, remained as prime minister of an interim administration until November 12, 1951. Matrika Prasad Koirala of the Nepal Congress party was prime minister from November 16, 1951 until August 14, 1952, after which King Tribhuvan introduced a period of direct rule,

which lasted until June 15, 1953 when M. P. Koirala again took over as prime minister. It is well documented that in the build-up to this historic change, and through the years that followed, India's influence over those running Nepal was very strong. One respected source says: "So marked was the growth of Indian influence during this period that at times it came close to total political and economic domination." (From *People Politics and Ideology, Democracy and Social Change in Nepal*, Hoftun, Raeper and Whelpton, 27.)

The Indian ambassador from 1949 to 1952, C. P. N. Singh, played a key part in the 1950 revolution, and his meddling in the affairs of the Nepali Congress party and in the shaping of Nepali government policy was notorious. Stories about his activities abound, but during a recent visit to the National Archives in London I unearthed this, new to me, account of how he saw his role and justified his actions. In a dispatch to London dated March 1, 1951, the British ambassador reported that the previous evening he had held a reception for the new Council of Ministers during which Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher had told a guest that he recently told C. P. N. Singh that he had information that Singh had obtained direct telephone connections to King Tribhuvan and B. P. Koirala, the leader of the Nepali Congress party. He had asked him if he thought that such direct contact was consistent with normal relations of a foreign representative. C. P. N. Singh had replied that it was not consistent with normal relations of a foreign representative, but his position as India's representative in Nepal was not normal. The last sentence in the dispatch stated: "An Indian on friendly terms with the Congress leaders told me yesterday that it was they who asked Nehru to appoint C. P. N. Singh as Ambassador to Nepal in August 1949 and it was through him that funds were sent to Congress followers in Kathmandu."

King Tribhuvan himself was very active in seeking Indian guidance. In his annual report for 1952, the British ambassador wrote that "the King of Nepal was in India when the year opened and again at its close. As also on four other occasions in between, and this was an indication of his dependence there." Later in the report, referring to a dip in Tribhuvan's popularity, which had peaked when the Rana regime ended, he wrote: "There is also a wide suspicion that he has no deep patriotism and his frequent trips to India for rather undignified relaxation do not help."

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In *Nepal: Strategy for Survival*, Leo Rose sums up Nepal's willingness to accede to India's demands in an appropriately stark way: "New Delhi's concept of Nepal's interests was accepted almost automatically in Kathmandu, at least at the official level. Indeed, it is

probable that some Nepali leaders tended to be over-responsive in this respect, interpreting even casual suggestions by the Indians as advice to be acted on. . . . On a number of occasions, the Nepal government not only tamely followed New Delhi's guidance but actually took the initiative in seeking it. That the Indians began to take Kathmandu too much for granted and tended to act in a rather cavalier and condescending fashion with regard to their own prerogatives, is therefore hardly surprising" (195).

This political reality was directly linked to India's perceived security needs. In a speech to the Indian Parliament on December 6, 1950, Nehru made the position very clear: "Now we have had from immemorial times a magnificent frontier, that is to say the Himalayas. . . . Now so far as the Himalayas are concerned, they lie on the other side of Nepal. . . . Therefore as much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot risk our own security by anything going wrong in Nepal which either permits that barrier to be crossed or otherwise weakens our frontier." Nehru's feelings about the Himalayas, bordering on the romantic, played a significant role in shaping Indian policy, right up to the start of the Sino-Indian 1962 War. These phrases, extracted from the opening lines of a speech he gave in Kathmandu on June 16, 1951, at the conclusion of his first visit, exemplify this: "Mountain-girt Nepal, daughter of the Himalayas, young sister of India, I have come here at last. . . . I am a child of the mountains myself, the mountains of the far north. . . . The Himalayas are the guardians and sentinels of India and Nepal . . . the fate of India and Nepal is linked closely together . . . it is particularly necessary that we hold together."

How these political and security conditions directly led to India's decision to deploy the checkposts on the northern frontier of Nepal is well explained in a book written by B. N. Mullik, the all-powerful head of India's Intelligence Bureau (IB), called *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*. Early in Chapter 6, under the heading "New Security Problems," Mullik writes that the IB had no doubts about Chinese intentions: that it would soon militarily overrun the whole of Tibet and close up to the borders of India. In August 1950, the IB submitted a detailed proposal recommending the establishment of twenty-one checkposts to guard the passes on the Indo-Tibetan frontier "from Ladakh in the north-western extremity to the Lohit Division in the north-east." On November 3, 1950, the IB produced a long note describing the new problems of frontier security that would result, and making comprehensive recommendations. This is a prelude to Mullik asserting that Sardar Patel accepted these suggestions and acted quickly by producing his long letter of November 7, 1950 to Nehru. The letter referred to the IB note and made a number of other recommendations. Mullik reproduces the Sardar Patel letter in full, which tells Nehru that "we have to consider what new situation now faces us as a result of the disappearance of Tibet, as we know it, and the expansion of China almost up to our gates." Key extracts from Sardar Patel's letter pertinent to

this article are:

“4. Let me consider the political consideration on this potentially troublesome frontier. Our north-eastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the tribal areas of Assam. From the point of view of communications they are weak spots. Continuous defensive lines do not exist. There is almost unlimited scope for infiltration. . . . Nepal has a weak oligarchic regime based almost entirely on force; it is in conflict with a turbulent element of the population as well as with enlightened ideas of the modern age. . . . In my judgment, therefore, the situation is one in which we cannot afford either to be complacent or to be vacillating. We must have a clear idea of what we wish to achieve and also the methods by which we would achieve it. Any faltering or lack of decisiveness in formulating our objectives or in pursuing our policy to attain these objectives is bound to weaken us and increase the threats which are so evident.

“6. It is, of course, impossible for me to be exhaustive in setting out all these problems. I am, however, giving below some of the problems, which, in my opinion, require early solution and round which we have to build our administrative or military policies and measures to implement them:

[f] The political and administrative steps which we should take to strengthen our northern and north-eastern frontiers. This would include the whole of the border, i.e. Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the Tribal Territory in Assam.

[h] Improvement of our communications, road, rail, air and wireless in these areas, and with our frontier outposts.

[i] Policing and intelligence of frontier posts.”

Mullik writes that as result of this letter and the IB note, among other measures, a high-powered committee presided over by Major-General Himmat Singhji was formed to make recommendations “about measures that should be taken to improve administration, defence, communications, etc. of all the frontier areas.” The relevant lines for checkposts in Nepal

appear in the last paragraph of the chapter: “Earlier when the scheme for frontier checkposts had been accepted, we had also impressed on the Government that no security measures for northern India could be anything near perfect unless the passes between Tibet on one side and Bhutan and Nepal on the other were properly guarded. The working out of a scheme, so far as Bhutan was concerned, was left to the Political Officer, Gangtok, but for one reason or the other this did not materialise for nearly a decade. But, after consulting our Ambassador in Nepal, a Deputy Director from the IB, Warriam Singh, was sent to Nepal and he had a very fruitful discussion with the Maharajah, who was then the Prime Minister. The Maharajah took some time to consider the offer made by us to assist Nepal to open checkposts on the Nepal-Tibet frontier. These checkposts were subsequently opened and manned jointly by Indian and Nepali staff. The number of posts was further increased and the staff expanded at the time of the Koirala Government.” (Emphasis added.)

Further helpful indications are given in Chapter 7 of Mullik’s book, “The Quest for Security.” The Himmat Singhji committee (also called the North and North-East Border Defence Committee) reported in two parts with the second part containing recommendations on Ladakh and the frontier regions of Himal Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal being submitted in September 1951. Mullik writes, “Actually the second part was held up to receive the recommendations of another committee headed by Major-General Thorat, which had been set up to assess the security needs of Nepal and its requirements for Indian assistance—and this latter committee submitted its report in August, 1951.” Two pages later, this committee is given another mention: “With regard to Nepal, on the basis of the Thorat Committee’s recommendations, this Committee also recommended that the Nepal government should be persuaded to survey the frontier and passes, establish checkposts where necessary, extend effective control to the remote areas, improve the road system and reorganise the Nepalese army on modern lines.” Mullik published his book in 1971 and his reference to “persuading” the Nepali government may have been an attempt to avoid touching on Nepali sensitivities. Starting with the tone of the Sardar Patel letter, India’s assertiveness and determination is clear, as is the mass of evidence pointing to Kathmandu’s willingness to respond with alacrity to any suggestion from Delhi. The point is made because another source states that Thorat recommended that the Government of India should carry out the land reconnaissance of 16 passes as a high priority (Mutual Security: The Case of India-Nepal,

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Sangeeta Thapliyal, 50).

This résumé of Indian decision-making puts a question mark over Buddhi Narayan Shrestha's claim that the checkposts were deployed "during the premiership of Matrika Prasad Koirala, beginning 9 June 1952." As maharaja, Mohan Shumsher was prime minister up to February 18, 1951, and, following Tribhuvan's return from Delhi, he retained the appointment as head of the interim Rana and Nepali Congress government up to November 16, 1951, when he was succeeded by M. P. Koirala. Other evidence suggests that the first deployments could have taken place as early as late 1951, and subsequent deployments took place, as Buddhi Narayan Shrestha indicates, over a number of years.

In his book, Buddhi Narayan Shrestha gives the location of the checkposts by name and district as follows:

Indian Military Check-posts on the Northern Frontier of Nepal (Deployed from 1952 to 1969)

Check-post	District
1. Tinkar Pass	Darchula
2. Taklakot	Bajhang
3. Muchu	Humla
4. Mugugaon	Mugu
5. Chharkabhot	Dolpa
6. Kaisang (Chhusang)	Mustang
7. Thorang	Manang
8. Larkay Pass	Gorkha
9. Atharasaya Khola	Gorkha
10. Somdang	Rasuwa
11. Rasuwagadhi	Rasuwa
12. Tatopani (Kodari)	Sindhupalchok
13. Lambagar	Dolakha
14. Namche (Chyalsa)	Solukhumbu
15. Chepuwa Pass	Sankhuwasabha
16. Olangchungola	Taplejung
17. Thaychammu	Taplejung
18. Chyangthapu	Panchthar

(Shrestha, 259)

The name given to some of the checkpoints is confusing. The one in Bajhang was located north of Chainpur to cover the historic trade route to Taklakot over the pass at Urai Lekh. The checkpoints were located from one to five days' walk from the frontier. Given that they were in position throughout the year, survival was a major determinant of the exact place chosen. For example, the Larkye Pass was covered by a detachment at Setibas, some five days walk from the frontier. The accounts of the foreign travelers who encountered these checkpoints indicate that at different times the checkpoints were occupied by Indian Army soldiers or Indian police officers or a mix of both. Perhaps early on it was more army with police taking over in the later stages. A Royal Nepal Army security presence was invariably located close by. The detachments reported by radio to a base station in the Indian embassy in Kathmandu, which had a small police presence dedicated to the task of command and control. Initially the police section in the embassy was headed by a superintendent of police. Over time this was upgraded first to deputy inspector and later to inspector general rank. Most of the checkpoints were engaged in asking locals who crossed into Tibet for trade or for work to gather information on troop deployments, road construction, and the economic state of the local population. They also attempted to recruit locals from across the border to act as informers. No doubt China was in the same game.

Given that India was making all the decisions on these checkpoints and the passes they should cover, Lipu Lekh's absence from the list is striking and revealing. Before plunging into such deep waters, it is useful to follow the military principle of first assessing the ground or geography before anything else. Google Earth is a useful guide, but so also are the blogs and photographs of the Indian pilgrims who have followed the officially approved route (by India and China) over Lipu Lekh to travel to Manasarovar and Kailash. [This account \(http://www.bcmtouring.com/forums/threads/when-i-went-walking-to-tibet-kailash-mansarovar-yatra-2011.36742/\)](http://www.bcmtouring.com/forums/threads/when-i-went-walking-to-tibet-kailash-mansarovar-yatra-2011.36742/) offers a good example.



From one pilgrim's account: "Nabhidhang, the overnight stop before crossing Lipu Lekh early the next day." Image: @DKay/bcmtouring.com

Kalapani is first mentioned on Day 11 (or Page 8) of the blog when the pilgrims stop briefly for a meal on their way to Nabhidhang, which is the last camp before they cross the Lipu Lekh Pass early the next day. On Kalapani, I quote, "Also this is the first and the only time when we cross River Kali and go on the other side. Apparently this part of land has been taken from Nepal on lease by the Govt. At Kalapani we go through Indian emigration and while we have breakfast our passports are stamped and returned back to us." Note also the traveler's remark, to be elaborated on later, that "Kalapani . . . is supposed to be the origin of River Kali." The pilgrims have to get close to Lipu Lekh shortly after first light as they cannot enter Tibet until the previous cohort of pilgrims exits, and this is complicated by Chinese time being two and half hours ahead. On the Chinese side, four-wheel-drive vehicles can now reach very close to the pass and busses can be driven to within a few kilometers of it. Pilgrims therefore only have a short distance to walk before traveling in comfort to Taklakot. The photos and the images from Google Earth on this and other blogs are helpful in showing the trail and geographical layout. It is worth noting, and this is particularly clear from Google Earth, that from Nabhidhang, as the valley narrows and becomes steeper, the trail goes higher above the west side of the river to approach Lipu Lekh. A ground reconnaissance would be needed to confirm the exact place of the source of the river. From Nepal's point of view, this should be done

jointly with India. But to quote from a [recent article](http://nepalforeignaffairs.com/authenticity-of-lipulekh-border-pass/) (<http://nepalforeignaffairs.com/authenticity-of-lipulekh-border-pass/>) by Buddhi Narayan Shrestha, “Even the Joint Technical Level Nepal-India Boundary Committee, which worked for 26 years up to the end of 2007, never ventured into delineating the source of the river Kalee, because it needs a political decision.” A necessary prelude to any “political decision” would be a decision by China and India to start demarcating their long border, and this remains a distant prospect.

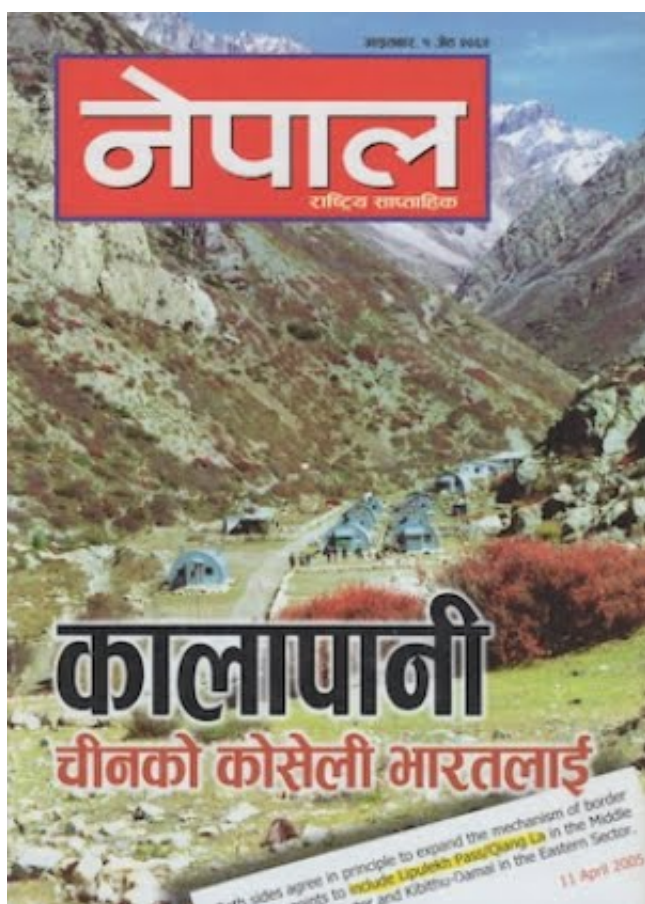
The latest public airing of the dispute over Lipu Lekh came on June 9 this year when Nepal’s parliament raised serious objections to the twenty-eighth point of a joint communiqué issued after the Indian prime minister’s visit to China. It stated that the two sides agreed to hold negotiation on augmenting the list of trade and commodities, and expanding the border trade, at the Lipu Lekh Pass. It is worth noting just how limited and restricted this trade is. The commodities are limited to what can be carried on pack animals and, for 2015, the period stipulated is from June 1 to October 31. For the rest of the year the pass is covered by deep snow.

Equal status with India and China over Lipu Lekh, and even for its recognition as a tri-junction, is now a difficult case for Nepal to make for a number of reasons. In contrast to official silence from Kathmandu, India, from the date of its independence, has assumed and acted on the basis that the trail to Lipu Lekh fell exclusively within its territory and that control and ownership of the pass was a matter exclusively between it and China. There is ample proof that China accepted this last premise. A copy of an extract of “The Sino-Indian Trade Agreement over Tibetan Border (1954),” dated April 29, 1954, can be found [here](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7807/Agreement+on+Trade+and+Intercourse+with+Tibet+Region) (<http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7807/Agreement+on+Trade+and+Intercourse+with+Tibet+Region>). Article IV states: “Traders and pilgrims of both countries may travel by the following passes and route: (1) Shipki La pass . . . (6) Lipu Lekh pass.” China initially insisted that the wording should be “the Chinese Government agrees to open the following passes” and India claimed that the final wording indicated Chinese acceptance that “the use of these six passes did not involve ownership because they were border passes.”

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The 1962 Sino-India War ended trading, and much else, but during Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to

Beijing in 1988 both countries agreed to resume border trade and to sign fresh agreements to make this possible. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) on “Resumption of Border Trade” was signed in December 1991 during Premier Li Peng’s visit to New Delhi. In an effort to strengthen border trade through the mutually agreed trading routes, India and China further signed a “Protocol of Entry and Exit Procedure” for border trade in July 1992. Lipu Lekh Pass was mentioned in both these agreements as a mutually recognized border trading point. Subsequently, both countries agreed to expand border trade in 2003 but to add the Nathu La as an additional entry and exit point to those agreed in the December 1991 MoU. Again, on April 11, 2005, the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, and his Indian counterpart, Manmohan Singh, signed [an agreement \(http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6539/Protocol+between+the+Government+of+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Government+of+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+Modalities+for+the+Implementatio+n+of+Confidence+Building+Measures+in+the+Military+Field+Along+the+Line+of+Actual+Control+in+the+IndiaChina+Border+Areas\)](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6539/Protocol+between+the+Government+of+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Government+of+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+Modalities+for+the+Implementatio+n+of+Confidence+Building+Measures+in+the+Military+Field+Along+the+Line+of+Actual+Control+in+the+IndiaChina+Border+Areas) aimed at confidence-building along the Line of Actual Control, Article V of which stated: “Both sides agree in principle to expand the mechanism of border meeting points to include Kibithu-Damai in the Eastern Sector and Lipulekh Pass/Qiang La in the Middle Sector. The precise locations of these border meeting points will be decided through mutual consultations.”



The cover of the May 15, 2005 issue of Nepal

The signing of this last agreement prompted the redoubtable Sudheer Sharma to write a long article in Nepal, dated May 15, 2005, with the eye-catching and significant title of “Kalapani: China’s gift to India.” The article argued that the new agreement had effectively stamped China’s endorsement of the Indian occupation of the Kalapani area and that this was linked to China recognizing Sikkim as part of India. An image of the front cover of this issue of Nepal can be seen above. The image shows Kalapani camp as it was some years ago, the valley leading north to Lipu Lekh and the title of Sudheer Sharma’s feature article. The text in the bottom right hand corner is a short extract from the April 11, 2005 agreement. This article was published during the absolute rule of King Gyanendra, but there is no record of

magazine.

him or his ministers uttering a single word of protest about the agreement at the time, or later. Part of India's case, which puts the

spotlight on China's role, is that if China saw Lipu Lekh as a tri-junction or as part of Nepal, it would not have signed these exclusive MoUs and agreements with India.

Tri-junctions of international borders cannot be fixed when, as in this case, two of the three countries, China and India, have not demarcated their border, nor have even agreed to do so. What divides the two countries at present is what is called a Line of Actual Control (LAC) of 4,057 kilometers in length. The term is a misnomer. Despite the two sides having signed three much-lauded border-related accords in 1993, 1996, and 2005, there is no mutually agreed line of control, never mind an actual line of control. The line that exists is disputed at numerous points. Prospects for resolution are well summed up in these lines from a recently published book, *Beijing's Power and China's Borders*: "In recent years the broadening of the Sino-Indian border talks into an all-encompassing strategic dialogue has been an unmistakable reminder that negotiations stand deadlocked. Yet neither side wants to abandon the apparently fruitless process." (Brahma Chellaney, "Sino-Indian Border Dispute," in *Beijing's Power and China's Borders*, Elleman, Kotkin, and Schofield). Until this deadlock is broken, there can be no progress in fixing the western tri-junction of India-Nepal-China nor the eastern tri-junction of Nepal-China-Sikkim. By way of another example, the exact location of the China-Myanmar-India tri-junction also remains in dispute, despite the signing of a Sino-Burmese Boundary Treaty on October 1, 1960. China supports Myanmar's case, but there is general recognition between the parties that a settlement of the dispute must await a final settlement of the Sino-Indian boundary.



Detail of a map of Uttarkhand, India showing Lipu Lekh Pass. ©Rajiv Rawat/uttarkhand.org

How is Kalapani linked to the argument over Lipu Lekh? At the heart of the dispute over both Lipu Lekh and Kalapani is the origin of the headwaters of the Mahakali River, as the Kali River is known in its lower reaches. Though there was no map attached to it, there is general agreement that the 1816 Sugauli Treaty between the British Raj and Nepal stipulated that “the Kali river” would mark Nepal’s western border. A glance at the map above, which shows a river flowing down from Limpiya Dhura (below Lampya La), makes clear that with such a delineation, Nepal’s case for control of Lipu Lekh and all the territory immediately south of the pass was indisputable. Maps originating after the treaty was signed confirm the acceptance of this river as the Kali and as the international border. Nepal’s claim to the Lipu Lekh pass remains unflinchingly based on the Sugauli Treaty. It maintains that it has never concluded any treaty with British-India or with independent India that supersedes the Sugauli Treaty. Strictly speaking, this is correct, but successive rulers of Nepal—Rana maharajas, Shah monarchs, and political leaders—have by their actions and inactions weakened Nepal’s case. After 1860, most British maps show the border to be the line of the river that flows down from Lipu Lekh. There is also an 1879 map that shows the frontier further to the east, following a

ridge that runs down from near the Tinker Pass. Trade was a great obsession in the British colonial mind, and presumably Britain realigned the border to gain exclusive control over trade across the Lipu Lekh Pass and the traders using it.

As part of this shifting of the border, and to give legitimacy to it, the river flowing from Lipu Lekh, which previously did not have a name, was designated by the British as the Kali and the river that formerly had that name became the Kuti Yangti, as it flows down near Kuti village. This change meant that Nepal lost some thousands of hectares of territory north of the river running down from Limpiya Dhura. It also meant that the historic trail to Lipu Lekh now fell exclusively on the west or British-India side of the river. One Nepal source has called this shifting of the border and renaming of rivers as “cartographic manipulation with a sinister motive.” (Nepal-India Boundary Issue: River Kali as International Boundary, Mangal Siddhi Manandhar and Hriday Lal Koirala.) Britain at the height of its colonial power was certainly capable of such actions, and worse. See as one example the action of Sir Henry McMahon at the Simla Conference of 1914, the record of which shows “responsible officials of British India to have acted to the injury of China in conscious violation of their instructions; deliberately misinforming their superiors in London of their actions; altering documents whose publication had been ordered by Parliament; lying at an international conference table and deliberately breaking a treaty between the United Kingdom and Russia.” (Dr. A. P. Rubin quoted in India’s China War, Neville Maxwell, 42.) Integral to all the actions listed was the attempt by McMahon, secretly and by sleight of hand, to shift a historic international boundary by the stroke of a pen on a map, “by the judicious use of a little extra red ink” (The McMahon Line, vol. 2, Alastair Lamb, 530). McMahon explained to London that his objective had been to secure a strategic watershed boundary and with it access to the shortest trade route to Tibet.

The Rana usurpation of the power of the Shah kings started on September 14, 1846, when Jung Bahadur Kunwar (later to change his name to Rana) massacred his rivals and quickly moved to establish the political system that bore his adopted name. It is unclear whether this change in the frontier was made with or without the agreement of the Rana maharaja. [Addressing an audience \(http://www.myrepublica.com/politics/story/26354/rana-pm-had-handed-over-lipu-lekh-to-india-mehta.html\)](http://www.myrepublica.com/politics/story/26354/rana-pm-had-handed-over-lipu-lekh-to-india-mehta.html) in Kathmandu on August 13, 2015, a retired Indian Army Major General, Ashok Mehta, asserted that the Lipu Lekh issue was resolved by Maharaja Chandra Shumsher Rana, and that he had in his possession the map which the maharaja handed over to the British. Chandra was the maharaja and ruling prime minister with absolute power from June 27, 1901 until his death on November 26, 1929. Even by Rana standards, his rule was notably repressive but he was notorious for working assiduously and obsequiously to gain British support for his position. The map, therefore, that Ashok Mehta claims “the Maharaja handed over” could be based on a case of British force majeure which

Chandra was, as ever, given sufficient inducement, ready to accept. Nepal has asked the Indian authorities to produce any reliable documents pertaining to the disputed claims, but nothing has yet been handed over.

Whatever the sequence that led to this new border being imposed or agreed, or whatever date it occurred, maps prepared in Nepal during the Panchayat regime are identical to the post-1860 maps in showing the border as following the line of the river that flows down from below Lipu Lekh. Again, this indicated an acceptance, whether consciously or not, that the traditional trail to the pass fell exclusively on the Indian side and that the border agreed as part of the Sugauli Treaty was no longer valid. Also unhelpful to Nepal's case is that the China-Nepal Boundary Treaty, formally signed by King Mahendra in Beijing on October 5, 1961 makes no reference at all to Lipu Lekh. The opening lines of Article 1 state: "The Chinese-Nepalese boundary line starts from the point where the watershed between the Kali River and the Tinkar River meet the watershed between the tributaries of the Mapchu (Karnali) River on the one hand and the Tinkar River on the other hand." (Emphasis added.) This roughly corresponds to the border shown on the 1879 map and the one claimed by India today. The Nepal government published a map in 1960 with a similar boundary line. Article 3 of the China-Nepal Boundary Agreement of March 21, 1960, required the two countries to exchange maps and to set up a joint committee to start the process of delineation and demarcation. Presumably the map Nepal submitted was similar to the one openly published.

Nepali sources point to continuing strong Indian influence in Nepal's affairs during this period of the early 1960s and resolutely maintain that no treaty or agreements have been concluded between Nepal and India or British-India that supersedes the Sugauli Treaty as regards Nepal's western border. However, all western and eastern borders must end at some point, north and south. King Mahendra's signing of the 1961 treaty seems to indicate, at the very least, an acceptance of a northwestern junction point to the east of Lipu Lekh. Since the stated purpose of King Mahendra's visit to China was to sign this treaty, one must assume he knew what he was doing, and, in particular, that the boundary proposed was the outcome of the work of the joint committee and took account of the map submitted by Nepal. The China-Nepal Boundary Protocol of January 20, 1963 reported that the permanent boundary markers had been established by the two parties "as numbered 1 to 79 in serial order from west to east." The protocol had "detailed maps" attached to it, but to my knowledge these have not been

“ King Mahendra's signing of the 1961 treaty seems to indicate, at the very least, an acceptance of a northwestern junction point to the east of Lipu Lekh. ”

published.

A further major complication for Nepal is that India rejects the claim that the river from Lipu Lekh is the renamed Kali River. It asserts, and claims that it has maps and diagrams to prove it, presumably based on the 1879 map, that the river Kali begins from the junction of the river that flows from Lipu Lekh and a stream that flows from springs in Kalapani. Hence, the earlier quote from the Indian pilgrim that “Kalapani . . . is supposed to be the origin of River Kali.” Nepali sources are united in claiming that the stream from within Kalapani camp originates from a manmade pond and that the channel connecting it to the river from Lipu Lekh has been artificially created. Sudheer Sharma strongly and very graphically spelled out this argument in an article in a July 1998 issue of Mulyankan, which was reproduced in the June 8, 2015 issue of [Esamata](http://esamata.com/np/2015/कालापानी-किन-र-कसरी-भारतल/) (<http://esamata.com/np/2015/कालापानी-किन-र-कसरी-भारतल/>). The translated title is: “Kalapani: Why and how has India encroached upon the border?”

A working translation of the relevant lines is: “India dug an artificial spring for the Kali (river) at the artificial Kalapani to give ‘legitimacy’ to its encroachment. There they collected the water which flows from the mountains into a small pond; a channel connects this to the Lipukhola (Lipu river). They have made the laughable claim that this very pond is the source of the Kali.”



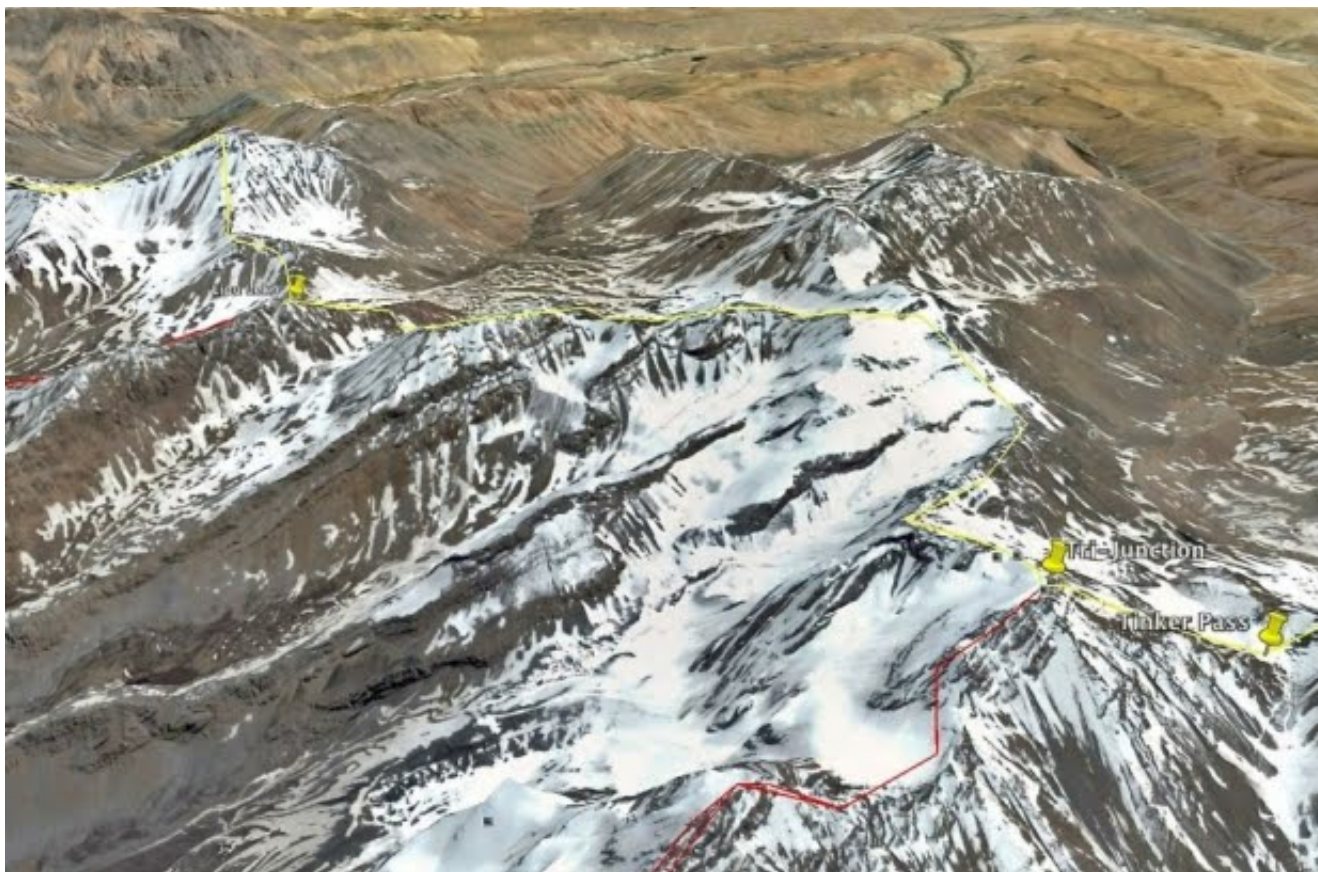
Pillar No 1 at Tinker Pass, seen from the Nepal side looking north into Tibet. Image: Subhak Mahato

The date on which this Kalapani stream first appeared on maps is disputed, but, whatever the maps show or do not show, the ground reality is that Indian security forces occupy the area of Kalapani to the east of the river, which traditionally has been regarded as the Nepali side. What is the value of doing so? There is evidence that the Indians first used Kalapani simply because it was the only piece of flat land in the area to establish a rudimentary camp to cover the approach to Lipu Lekh. At a later stage they must have come to realize that under the complexities of Riparian water rights their claim to control the headwaters of the Mahakali River would be strengthened by their occupation of Kalapani. At the military and security level, answers can only be speculative, but presumably the thinking is that an Indian security presence there helps to balance the Chinese security force presence in Taklakot just a short distance away over Lipu Lekh. There may also be an intelligence advantage. It is clear from the photos of the Indian pilgrims that they are under strict orders not to take photos of the main buildings and installations on the site.

There is one other significant consequence of India's occupation of Kalapani. As the map shows, India has used its argument on the origin of the Kali river, and its occupation of the site, to claim a frontier line which corresponds to the 1879 map, and the 1960 Nepal map, in following a ridge line ("Kali river watershed" on map) that runs from just south of Kalapani to a point slightly to the west of Tinker Pass, which is about 5 kilometers east, southeast of Lipu Lekh. Tinker Pass is the location of Pillar Number 1 of 79 marking the Sino-Nepal Border. Nepal maintains that the tri-junction should be at Lipu Lekh, where Pillar Number 0 should be placed. However, for the present, the reality is that the India-Nepal-China tri-junction is de facto just to the west of Border Pillar Number 1. The following two screenshots from Google Earth should make this clear.



The top red line, which follows the river up from Kalapani to Nabhidhang toward Lipu Lekh, shows the border that appeared in maps after the 1860s and in the Panchayat era. The lower red line, which follows a watershed from Kalapani to a tri-junction on the main ridge to the north, indicates India's view of where the border runs. An 1879 map shows this border, as does a map produced by the Government of Nepal in 1960.



This shows in more detail where India considers the India-Nepal-China tri-junction should be, just to the west of the Tinker Pass. Lipu Lekh is 5 kilometers further west along the ridge.

Nepal's case for Kalapani has been badly undermined by long years of silence on the issue by the country's leaders. Some key related questions make that clear. When did India first occupy Kalapani? Who in Kathmandu knew what, and when? What did they do about it? Received wisdom on the start of Indian occupation stems from the views of Bhuddi Narayan Shrestha, which have been endlessly repeated in just about every article written on the subject. His June 27, 2015 article, referred to earlier, restates his view:

“If we have a look on the history of Sino-Indian border dispute, there was a brief but fierce fighting border war from October 20 to November 21, 1962. During the border war, in the Western sector, the Chinese forces marched up to the borderline shown in the Chinese maps dating back to the Manchu Dynasty. India's option was to defend on the McMahon Line as its northern boundary-line. After the Chinese carried out an all-out counter-attack along the entire Sino-Indian border. So Indian forces were compelled to retard back after a heavy attack of the Chinese army. The Indian military, when pulling back, came to realize that the Lipulekh Pass could be a potential strategic point, given that it is located at 5,029 metres in the Nepali frontier. They established a camp at Kalapani area. The camp, which is outfitted with underground bunkers, is near about ten kilometers west of the Lipulekh Pass.”

No reference has ever been given to support the contention of Kalapani first being occupied by the Indians in November 1962, and for the reasons described. However, we know emphatically that the Chinese did not conduct “an all-out counter-attack along the entire Sino-Indian border.” The fighting was confined to the western and eastern sectors (Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh) with the central sector, including north of Lipu Lekh, seeing very little action. Soldiers from both sides would have been deployed near the border in this sector but very few shots, if any, were fired. Toward the end of November, snow would have been falling on Lipu Lekh and any Indian Army soldiers in observation posts there would have pulled back a short distance down the valley, almost certainly to prepared winter accommodation in Kalapani as there is a weight of evidence that Indian security force personnel occupied this flat and sheltered spot well before 1962. For example: “Official sources in India claim that the administrative and revenue records dating back to 1830s (available with the UP state government), show that Kalapani area has traditionally been administered as part of Pithoragarh district. A State Police post was established by the state government at the now disputed site in 1956 and operated from here till 1979. Since 1979, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) have been manning a post for surveillance over the area.” More information [here \(http://www.ipcs.org/article/nepal/kalapani-a-bone-of-contention-between-india-and-nepal-422.html\)](http://www.ipcs.org/article/nepal/kalapani-a-bone-of-contention-between-india-and-nepal-422.html).

An earlier date than November 1962 is also confirmed by Nepali sources. [An article \(http://www.annapurnapost.com/News.aspx/story/15950\)](http://www.annapurnapost.com/News.aspx/story/15950) in the Annapurna Post dated August 5, 2015, written by the journalist Syam Bhatta, stated that “though it is commonly accepted that the Indian Army encroached upon Kalapani in 1962 at the time of the India-China war, an elected member of the National Panchayat from Byas, Bahadur Singh Aitwal, says that Indian security forces were present in Kalapani from 1959. Aitawal also says that he formally informed the government about this border encroachment in 1974/1975 (BS 2031).” (Note: Byas is a Village Development Committee in Northern Darchula. Bahadur Singh Aitwal was appointed as assistant minister on July 16, 1973, in the wake of Kirti Nidhi Bista’s resignation as prime minister.)

Sudheer Sharma’s Nepal article from May 15, 2005, referred to earlier, states: “While conducting the border survey with China four decades ago the Nepalese side had already found out about the presence of an Indian platoon in Kalapani. In Asar month of 2056 B.S [June–July 1999], Retired Major Shambhu Sumshere Jung Bahadur Rana of the Royal Nepalese Army, who had also worked under the Border Commission, revealed in public that, ‘In the year 2018 B.S [1961/1962] itself, the Indian army were stationed in Kalapani.’” (Note: 2018 B.S. ended on April 12, 1962, which is seven months before the 1962 war started.) The article also addresses the key question:

“Why was the Indian army’s presence in Kalapani so grossly overlooked? When Budhabar (Shrawan 13, 2055 – 1998), a weekly newspaper, posed this question to Rishikesh Shah, he said, ‘During that time King Mahendra was there. Yes, I was in the Council of Ministers, but I was not the foreign minister. I asked the King about this, but he told me that this was not a matter concerning me or my ministry, so I should shut up. As far as I understand, during that time King Mahendra’s thinking was that India should not be annoyed in any way.’ . . . After the Border Administration Office had been set up below Kalapani at Changru in the year 2034 BS [1977], the office used to send reports and information about it to Kathmandu every year. The District Administration Office used to inform the Home Ministry about it in a timely way but people at the top did not show much interest in it. This issue remained a topic not to be discussed during the entire Panchayat era.” (Note: Rishikesh Shah was finance minister from December 1960 to August 1962 at which point, for just two months, he became foreign minister. He retained a status equivalent to ministerial rank for another year.)

“ I asked the King about this, but he told me that this was not a matter concerning me or my ministry, so I should shut up. As far as I understand, during that time King Mahendra’s thinking was that India should not be annoyed in any way. ”

Sudheer Sharma’s July 1998 article in Mulyankan dates Rishikesh Shah’s interaction with Mahendra to very shortly after the monarch’s coup on December 15, 1960. A working translation of the relevant lines is: “It has been said that King Mahendra received information about the encroachment at Kalapani right when it happened. Rishikesh Shah, who was Finance Minister in the government which came after the 1960 coup, said: ‘We had known a long time back that the army had been staying in Kalapani. And in my status as a minister, I reported this matter to King Mahendra. His Majesty said in fact—India is quite angry with me, let’s not anger them further right now. Let them stay in Kalapani for now.’”

In his book, Buddhi Narayan Shrestha makes the same point on why Mahendra refused to act on information received about Kalapani: “Nepalese officials, especially the Chief District Officers of Darchula have reported to the center time and again mentioning that the Nepalese territory of Kalapani has been encroached on by the Indian army men who have erected some constructions there. But it was ignored during the Panchayat era to sustain the Panchayat system in Nepal. At that time Nepal was not in a position to protest and oppose India for the sake of Panchayat regime.”

King Mahendra's coup against the democratically elected government of B. P. Koirala on December 15, 1960 showed that what ultimately mattered to him was the preservation of the monarchy and the Shah dynasty in its absolute form. This was also demonstrated when he authorized the signing in New Delhi of the secret Arms Supply Accord on January 30, 1965, the details of which were finally made public in 1989. For Mahendra, national interest was always placed below what for him was the vital interest of preserving his regime. His inaction over Kalapani exemplifies the same order of priority despite all the talk throughout the Panchayat period of nationalism and protecting territorial integrity. The same can be said about his successor King Birendra who, during his period of absolute rule, never allowed his ministers to utter a word on the subject. It was not until 1996, six years after the collapse of the Panchayat system, that Nepal officially for the first time raised the issue of Kalapani with India at the time of signing the Mahakali Treaty. A joint technical committee was eventually formed in 2002 to address the issue. It would take another article to elaborate on all the bureaucratic and political maneuvering that has gone on subsequently, all to achieve little progress. Nepali politicians of all shades have been reluctant to press India strongly on the issue; like their Rana and Shah predecessors, despite much talk, their actions have shown that they also placed getting Delhi's personal recognition and support ahead of other considerations. [An article \(http://www.ekantipur.com/2015/01/06/capital/nepal-aims-to-settle-boundary-dispute-with-india-in-4-years/399964.html\)](http://www.ekantipur.com/2015/01/06/capital/nepal-aims-to-settle-boundary-dispute-with-india-in-4-years/399964.html) in The Kathmandu Post of January 6, 2015 had a heading of "Nepal aims to settle boundary dispute with India in 4 years." In the course of a few lines it said that a new field survey with India would not include Kalapani but doing so was "now under consideration at the top bureaucratic level." We must await developments, which are likely to be long drawn out. Any meaningful process to resolve the issue must await India and China agreeing to start the demarcation of their long border—and that day still looks some way ahead. Until then, India can only stall, as they have adroitly been doing, with Nepal's covert connivance, for many years.

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The historic trading pass of Urai Lekh looking east, with Nepal and the Seti gorge on the right and the trail into Tibet on the left. It is the site of Border Pillar Number 2. Wignall and his companions used this pass when illegally entering Tibet in the late autumn of 1955. They were forced to return by the same route in winter. Image: ©Jamie McGuinness/Project Himalaya

Foreign travelers and the checkpoints

Sydney Wignall, 1955

The last part of this article returns to the subject of the checkpoints and the accounts given by some notable foreign travelers who stumbled upon them in various remote locations. These throw interesting light on the checkpoints and none more so than Sydney Wignall's account of meeting a detachment of the Indian Army in Dhuli village, north of Chainpur in Bajhang district, in December 1955. In 1996, Wignall published the story of how this came about in his excellent book, *Spy on the Roof of the World*. The title gives the clue to the adventure. During the planning for a small expedition to climb Nalkankar in northwest Nepal, he was approached by an intelligence officer based in the Indian High Commission in London. This operative persuaded Wignall to cross the border into Tibet to climb Gurla Mandhata, from the slopes of which he would have a good view of Chinese military activity in the Taklakot area. On October 21, 1955, Wignall, his friend John Harrop, and a young Nepali liaison officer entered Tibet having climbed through the Seti Gorge and crossed the Urai Lekh Pass. Shortly afterwards they were arrested by the Chinese and imprisoned in Taklakot, during which Wignall and Harrop were subjected to some harsh interrogation. In December they were

released by the Chinese after international concern had been expressed about their disappearance. By far the most convenient and safest way back to safety was to cross the Lipu Lekh Pass into India, but the Chinese, with the intention that they would not survive to tell the story of their imprisonment, insisted that they go back over the Urai Lekh Pass and descend the Seti Gorge, something that locals considered impossible to do in winter. The gripping chapter describing how they managed this descent is worth the price of Wignall's book alone. A good summary of the book is given in this Nepali Times [article](http://nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=7071#.VdD0eukcM-Q) (<http://nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=7071#.VdD0eukcM-Q>).

In the opening chapter of his book, Wignall describes how in 1936 the Austrian mountaineer Herbert Tichy made an attempt to climb Gaurila Mandhata having ridden from Austria to India on a Puch motorcycle and crossed the Lipu Lekh into Tibet dressed as an Indian religious mendicant. This underlines the earlier point that sometime after 1860 the British had shifted the border to the river that flows down from Lipu Lekh. The briefings Wignall received from two Indian intelligence officers before departing on his adventure indicate that after independence the new rulers in Delhi had no doubts on the matter. In London he was advised to return over the Lipu Lekh Pass into India as the Urai Lekh Pass would be difficult after October and the Seti Gorge was far from safe even in summer. He was told, "Whatever happens we will have men stationed on the Indian side of the Lipu Lekh." He was also told that moves were afoot for India to participate in forming Nepal's foreign policy and to place Indian Army detachments at key strategic places close to the Nepal-Tibet border. In Delhi he was told that India was getting intelligence from an agent in Taklakot "who is posing as an Indian trader, and continually crosses and recrosses the Lipu Lekh between India and Tibet." He was again warned about the dangers of getting trapped on the Tibetan side when the winter snows set in, "but India was now sending army patrols into Nepal and with luck we might have a military post established in your area before you come out of Tibet. If we do, then that detachment will be equipped with a radio transmitter and any intelligence you can bring out of Tibet will be sent to our HQ here in Delhi very quickly."

After surviving the descent of the gorge on his return into Nepal, Wignall describes how the first locals they met passed on the news that since they last passed through Dhuli village on their way into Tibet, a checkpoint with a radio had been set up staffed by two Indian Army officers and a number of Indian Army Gorkha soldiers. Shortly afterward, the two officers came to see them and expressed surprise that they had not returned to safety by crossing the Lipu Lekh Pass into India. Later the three survivors arrived at the accommodation that housed the detachment. The Indian and Nepali flags flew above the house, and, as they approached, the Gorkha soldiers formed up and presented arms to greet them. Wignall had managed to gather some vital intelligence, but the commanding officer told him that the detachment's

radio had “packed up.”

Malcolm Meerendonk, 1963

It is striking that David Snellgrove, who passed through Dunai and Jomsom in 1956 on his epic journey across a number of the Tibetan-speaking areas on the northern border (memorably recounted in his *Himalayan Pilgrimage*) makes no reference in his writings to Indian checkposts. However, there are indications that he was being discreet, presumably because the first edition of his book was published as early as 1961 when there were still considerable national sensitivities about the existence of these foreign-manned outposts on Nepali soil. When in Dunai he refers to having a farewell meal with “officers of the Frontier check-post,” but his silence about the checkpost in Jomsom is more revealing. He remarks that “the people were very friendly and Professor Tucci who was here before me was very well remembered.” Tucci’s second visit to Jomsom was in October 1954 when he commented specifically: “Here there was another involuntary stop. At the guard house Indian soldiers and Nepalese officials were stationed to keep watch on the caravans descending from the north. They came to meet us, shook hands with us and invited us to take tea with them. . . . The controls are very strict on both sides of the frontier; Indian soldiers to the south and Chinese soldiers to the north keep watch.” (*Nepal: The Discovery of the Malla*.) Tucci had also passed through Jomsom in 1952, and in his book *Journey to Mustang* made no reference to Indian soldiers.

The Mustang checkpost played a significant role in an incident that caused a major diplomatic rift between Nepal and China. British Foreign Office files in the National Archives give exhaustive detail on it. They record that on June 26, 1960, the radio at the checkpoint was used to transmit a request from the raja of Mustang for 500 army reinforcements to deal with the sudden appearance of over 1,000 Chinese troops on the border. It was not clear if an incursion had taken place. An order was passed the next day to the Nepal Army commander attached to the checkpost to send out an unarmed party to verify the raja’s report. (The boundary agreement signed on March 21, 1960, stipulated that no armed personnel were permitted to operate within 20 kilometers of the border.) On the evening of June 28 information was transmitted to Kathmandu that one member of the unarmed group sent to act on the order had been killed and another wounded after Chinese troops opened fire on the party 300 meters inside Nepali territory. Others in the group were taken prisoner. The incident generated a number of tough diplomatic exchanges. The two prime ministers, Zhou Enlai and B. P. Koirala, sent personal letters to each other: the former’s exuding his famous charm; the latter’s polite but impressively robust. Some details are disputed, and both sides never budged from where they said the firing occurred, but B. P. Koirala, under pressure from

all sides, emerged as the hero of the hour, forcing the Chinese to make a qualified apology and pay the demanded 50,000 rupees as compensation. A future article will give a full account of the incident and its diplomatic aftermath, but this extract of a statement by the home minister, S. P. Upadhyaya, to the Nepal Senate on July 1, 1960 exemplifies Nepali sensitivity on the checkposts:

“He refuted the propaganda that the reports of the Chinese attack had come from ‘Indian check-posts.’ He made it ‘absolutely clear once more’ that there were no Indian check-posts in Nepal; all the check-posts were Nepalese and reports of the incident came from Nepalese check-posts in Nepalese code. There might be Indian technicians working on the radio-communication system at the check-posts just as there were foreign technicians and experts in other departments of the Government of Nepal.” (China–South Asia Relations, 1947–1980, vol. 2, ed. Ravindra K. Jain.)



Malcolm Meerendonk, left, with Dor Bahadur Bista and Captain Krishna Raj Pant, the householder, in Bijeshwari, Kathmandu in 1963, prior to departing on his secret mission to Dolpo. Image: Jim Fisher, used with permission

The best detail on checkposts at Dunai and at Jomsom, and the best from any foreign traveler for any checkpost, comes from an unlikely source. In early 1963 Major Malcolm Meerendonk was the senior education officer at the Training Depot, the Brigade of Gurkhas, at Sungei

Patani in northwest Malaya. He was responsible, along with other work, for Nepali language training of British officers joining the brigade. Apart from Nepali, he had a practical working knowledge of both Chinese and Tibetan, and had been attached to a Nepal Army unit during his war service in India. In 1949, he wrote a “Basic Gurkhali Grammar” (in Roman script), and in 1959 he published a pocket book, Basic Gurkhali Dictionary, described in 2013 by James F. Fisher, an anthropologist renowned for his work in Nepal, as “the best pocket dictionary of Nepali.”

In the summer of 1963, Meerendonk did an epic 50-day trek from Pokhara to Dolpo and back. He published an account of this in two parts in *Torch*, the journal of the Royal Army Educational Corps Association: Part 1 in the May 1964 issue and Part 2 in the November 1964 issue. He took 30 days to get from Pokhara to Shey Gompa following the route that Peter Matthiessen describes so graphically in his book *The Snow Leopard*. Matthiessen did the journey with George Schaller in 1973, so by ten years Malcolm Meerendonk was the first foreigner to reach the heart of Dolpo by the very difficult route they followed. From Shey he went on to Saldang, Tarap, Chharka, Jomsom, and back to Pokhara. It was clearly not done for the good of his health, particularly as the army had already medically downgraded him. The only clue he gave in his 1964 articles was that on his way to Saldang he met a messenger saying that Nyima Tshering was expecting him. Meerendonk remarks that he had business with Nyima Tshering and later recounts that he had many audiences with him in Saldang. It is clear from the text that Meerendonk had read Snellgrove’s book before going on this trek, and would have greatly benefitted from doing so. Indeed it would have been essential reading for him. The significance of Nyima Tsering as “the big man of Dolpo” who was the key informant on all that had recently happened in the district and all that was currently going on, comes out very clearly in Snellgrove. Meerendonk knew, therefore, that Nyima Tshering was the man in Dolpo he needed to contact to get the intelligence he sought. But what information was he seeking? An officer serving with Meerendonk at the time told me recently that on his return to Sungei Patani, “He would only say that he had been to a very remote area, gathering intelligence, but would not elaborate on the location or the task.”

In 2011, while searching through Foreign Office files in the National Archives in London for information on Khampas, I came across references not just to a secret report written by Major Meerendonk as a result of his trek in 1963, but direct quotations from it. However, of the actual report there was no sign and various Freedom of Information requests failed to locate it. Fortunately, this secret report is now available for all to read thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Gerry Birch, a retired Brigade of Gurkha’s officer and long-time stalwart of the Britain-Nepal Society, and currently the editor of its journal. The secret report was published in the [2012 issue \(http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/bnsj/pdf/bnsj_36.pdf\)](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/bnsj/pdf/bnsj_36.pdf).

The report is at Pages 7 to 18 and Gerry Birch's introduction to it, and the opening paragraph of his introduction on Page 2, gives its provenance. What he does not say is that what was handed over to him by Malcolm Meerendonk's widow was a flimsy, barely legible carbon copy that required many hours of work to decipher and type into the form we can now read. It is clear that the trek had high-level approval from some Nepali authorities in Kathmandu, and most certainly from the top ranks of the Nepal Army. His mission was to find out if there had been any Chinese Army activity in this part of the northern border following the 1962 Sino-Indian War. It is also clear that a subsidiary task was to find out what information he could about Khampa activity in Dolpo and Mustang. Based on what we know now, Meerendonk was a little mixed up about "the Dalai Lama's soldiers" and the Khampas in lower Mustang, but in the circumstances of the time this was understandable. It is a very interesting report, even though it covers just the Dunai to Jomsom part of his 50-day walk.

From his conversations with Nyima Tsering and his grandson we learn that the checkpost at Dunai had originally been located near Saldang, "with a company of Nepalese soldiers to deal with Khamba bands who were making a nuisance of themselves, but that due to the intense cold winter and to the impossibility of obtaining food in Dolpo, the post had been withdrawn to Dunai on Nyima Tsering's offer to undertake to deal with the Khamba nuisance himself and to render reports if necessary." Meerendonk writes: "As the acknowledged unofficial link between the people of Dolpo and the central government, a source of info and influence for good, Nyima Tsering is a man of unusual importance in a region where powerful foreign influence and disturbing elements are so close at hand, while the central government is far away and its authority or influence for the good of the people as yet nowhere apparent."

The report gives revealing detail about the checkpost at Dunai and what life was like in these lonely outposts. Much of it is worth repeating:

[a] The establishment was for five Indian police officers, of whom one was on leave in India and one in India sick. Met the OSP, an elderly Sikh who was to retire in 6 weeks time and had been four years in check posts. He was most amiable, and did all he could to make me welcome: he was assisted by a ASP (a Brahmin) somewhat younger with similar service in check posts, and a Brahmin wireless operator.

[b] They appeared to have nothing whatsoever to do and were entirely concerned with minor domestic economy and efforts to provide for day to day needs, including various hobbies to

pass the time such as running a tiny school for the local children, in a place where there were no amenities, no rations supplied, and very little obtainable locally to supplement the meagre stores of rice and flour brought from India by members of the post returning from leave. They did some arrangement whereby reports of any unusual movements or events reached them from Dolpo, where the check post used to be but was proved untenable. They sent or received Sitreps from the Indian embassy by radio about twice per week. They received a course in Gurkhali and Tibetan in Delhi, before they were posted to check posts.

[c] Describing themselves as there purely for the protection of the Indian officers were a Nepalese Army naik and a section of H. R. Company. There was also a section still there whom they had relieved, with orders from the C-in-C to remain till I had gone and to detach men to accompany me to Dolpo should I require it. I politely declined the offer.

[d] The relations between the Indians, Nepalese soldiers and local people were the most amicable and intimate. Nothing and no-one passed without their coming to hear of it. Significant of this 'intelligence' system was that the OSP and officers were all waiting to greet me a quarter of a mile from the check post when I arrived unexpectedly along the path over which there was no observation possible from the post, and that they knew of my arrival in Tarakot the day before. . .

[e] Owing to the unexpected number of signals from Army HQ about me before my arrival (six days late) all were intensely intrigued about my mission and personal importance. They turned out the Guard for my inspection on arrival. They did not however bother me with pointed questions, though they were particularly interested to know if I was looking for Khambas. They appeared to know nothing about Khambas themselves which was not surprising, as it turned out, for I met none myself in the part of Dolpo with which they were concerned. On the morning of my departure the ASP left before daybreak to meet the Nepalese liaison officer with the Austrian Dhaulagiri Expedition; Lt Krishna Bom Rana, somewhere in the Tarakot direction."

Much of Meerendonk's detail on the checkpost at Jomsom is also worth repeating:

[1] The post was manned by a complete company (No. 4 H. K. Company) under Capt Lalita SJB Rana, an amiable simple type who slept when he had nothing better to do. His sentries had their rifles chained to their waists. He greeted me warmly, was not in the least inquisitive but having received advance notice from the C-in-C of my arrival took me for granted. He arranged rations, accommodation, detailed a L/Cpl to guide me to Kaji Govindra Sher Chan's house in Tukcha next day, and gave me dinner in his quarter. He did not take me to meet the Indian officers who lived in separate quarters, but we all met up by chance in the evening and chatted about nothing in particular. He told me that he had been stationed with a platoon in Mustang last year but that there was now no-one there. He had also been detailed to take a section and register the numbers and needs of Khamba refugees in the mountains on the way to Tsarka off the main route, but had found the way blocked by snow and the Khambas not co-operative. While investigating reports of Khamba raiders north of Tukcha a few months back they had been fired on while returning to camp by Khambas armed with machine guns. They had no further trouble and were confined to barracks pending any need for operations against marauding Khamba gangs. Their job was to prevent the unauthorised use of the main road by gangs going south or north. This was apparently the Nepalese Government's effort to control Khamba activities, but as somebody was supplying them with arms and ammo it was difficult to do more, since they were elusive and untraceable in the mountains. He had no idea who supplied the arms or how, but thought it was easy enough to accomplish.

[2] The Indian police officers of the post were on the same establishment of five as in the case of Duniahi, with two on leave; they were inquisitive to the point of suspiciousness, and their OSP, a Rajput, asked me point-blank if I had been looking for Khambas, and what I had seen, and did I know where they got their arms from? It is possible that they quite honestly did not know, and were trying to find out if it could possibly be the British who were behind it. I was able to tell them no more than they could see with their own eyes. No-one knew anything about air-drops. [Note: There had been two CIA airdrops by this stage, both just north of the border. The weapons and supplies were brought back into Mustang by prepositioned Khampas.]

[3] The relationship between the Nepalese, the Indians and the local people was obviously friendly though by no means as cordial and intimate as at Duniahi. The only apparent reasons were:

(a) The Nepalese troops had their own officer and refused to introduce me to the Indian OSP on my arrival. They kept me waiting half an hour until their own OC was available.

(b) The local people are not Nepali but Lo-pa, Thak-pa and mutually suspicious Tibetan groups.”

George Patterson, 1964

In 1964, George Patterson and a small film crew arrived in Kathmandu intent on getting to Mustang. His aim was to persuade some Khampas to carry out an armed raid into Tibet so that he could film it to prove to the outside world that Tibetans were still resisting the Chinese armed invasion of their country. He was told that it was impossible for him to go to Mustang, but by chance he heard about a small Khampa band in the remote area of Tsum. He managed to obtain a trek permit to travel from Kathmandu to Pokhara. On reaching Arughat he headed north up the Budhi Gandaki on the trail that leads toward Nubri and the Tibetan border. After passing through the small village of Setibas he knew that the way to Tsum broke away from the river to head northeast up a long and steep trail. In his book *A Fool at Forty*, Patterson reveals that he knew there was an Indian checkpost in Setibas and that there was no way to avoid it. He wrote: “This was our most critical test since leaving Kathmandu. We not only had to be unsuspected here, we had to be so lily-white that they would not think of radioing news of our presence to Kathmandu.” In the event all went well. He states: “The officer in charge was a friendly Indian with two junior officers—one a Nepali—and a few soldiers. We stopped at the



Patterson arriving in India after crossing Tibet in mid-winter, 1950. Image: Unknown

post for an hour, drinking tea and exchanging items of information. The officer-in-charge had spent twelve years in the Himalayas in various check posts, and we gathered that there had been an increase in the number of refugees crossing the border—thousands in this area alone, according to reports reaching the check post.” Characteristically, Patterson could not resist giving his views on the utility of deploying such checkposts: “While the idea of wireless communications from the remote snows to the capital of Kathmandu was excellent in principle, in practice it was a feeble, almost completely useless, precaution. There were only ten of these remote check posts in less than 800 miles of gigantic mountain, valley and forested frontiers. What went on in the next valley was unknown to them, let alone what was taking place five days’ journey northward to the border.”

Patterson did manage to persuade the small Khampa band to carry out an ambush across the border and it was with some trepidation that he passed through Setibas again on his way back to Kathmandu carrying the precious film of the ambush. Fortunately for him, he reached the checkpost during a storm with torrential rain falling and was able to report that those in the checkpost were “as unsuspecting and friendly as before.” He reported that they spent some time in the Officers’ Mess “drinking tea, and we gave to the Mess a welcome gift of several packets of cocoa. After we had signed the Registration Book we said that we must get further down the trail that night—and the friendly officers even offered us the services of a guide.” (For a full account of Patterson’s activities at this time, read my article “[Raid into Tibet](http://recordnepal.com/wire/raid-tibet) (<http://recordnepal.com/wire/raid-tibet>).”)

Duncan Forbes, 1956

In his book *The Heart of Nepal*, Duncan Forbes, an officer in Britain’s Brigade of Gurkhas, describes a trek he made in 1956 to the border post at Rasuwagadhi during a visit to Nepal to attend King Mahendra’s coronation. When he arrived at the village of Timure, which lies a few kilometers from the frontier, he found “a small body of Indian police who were maintaining a signal station, and we accepted their hospitality for the night.” On returning from visiting the frontier post he stopped overnight at Timure and had what was clearly a jovial evening with the Indian detachment. He said: “They seemed to be very much a group of exiles in this foreign land, being at the extremity of a long, thin line down to Kathmandu, and then to Delhi. They said they had been long periods out of touch with their families, and without leave. In fact the Inspector, who was shortly to be relieved, could almost have been described in Air Force parlance as ‘round the bend’. He sought to forget his exile by flying kites and saying his prayers, and it was to the accompaniment of an incantation ‘Hari-Ram-Sita-Ram-Hanuman-Vishnu-Narayanji’ that we dozed away.”

Everest Story, 1953

Another group of foreigners who encountered an Indian checkpost were members of the 1953 British Everest Expedition under the leadership of Colonel John Hunt. In his book *The Ascent of Everest*, he writes that when the team arrived in Namche, “We were surprised to find a small wireless station manned by Indian Government officials. Characteristic of the kindness of the Indian Ambassador in Kathmandu were his instructions to Mr. Tiwari, who was in charge of the post, that he should assist us by handling urgent messages. We had reason to be most grateful for this concession on several occasions during our stay.”

The Times newspaper was a major sponsor of the expedition, and, to the anger of many other journalists deployed to Nepal to cover the story, it laid down very strict conditions to ensure that it had exclusive rights to all news from Colonel Hunt and his team. A journalist from The Times, James Morris, was embedded with the expedition as a Special Correspondent. In 1972, she changed from living as male to living as female and became Jan Morris. She has earned a well-deserved reputation as an outstanding travel writer and historian of the British Empire. In 1958 she published *Coronation Everest*, a very well reviewed account of her time on Everest. It is an excellent read. This part of my article draws heavily on many details from it.

Another journalist from The Times, Don Hutchinson, was based in Kathmandu. His job was to receive Morris’s dispatches, interpret them and add to them where necessary, and to get them safely and quickly transmitted to London from the cable office. The messages were delivered to him by runner from the expedition’s base camp. There was no shortage of foreign journalists in Nepal who wanted to break the monopoly of The Times by using any means necessary. It was obvious that news of a successful ascent would be the ultimate prize for any journalist. Morris and Hutchinson gave considerable thought to how they would protect the privileged position of The Times. It was impossible to encode complete descriptive passages, but code words were drawn up to cover personal names, key events, places, and altitude. The particular words selected meant that a message would read as nonsense, and obviously coded to cover something important. The trustworthiness of the runners was achieved by paying them well with an attractive bonus based on the number of days they took to get from base camp to Kathmandu: typically, from six to eight. The British ambassador, Mr. Summerhayes, readily agreed that Foreign Office secure communications to London could be used to transmit the message announcing success or failure of the expedition.

Morris traveled with the Rear Party some ten days behind the climbing group. Major Jimmy Roberts was in charge. The party’s main job was to bring further supplies of oxygen that would be needed higher on the mountain. On the evening of the first day’s walk out of

Kathmandu, the British defence attaché drove up in a large station wagon and told Roberts that John Hunt had sent a radio message from Namche asking him to check all the oxygen cylinders because tests on some with the main party indicated that there might be a problem. There was not, but this was the first time that Morris heard that there was a radio so comparatively close to base camp. Later Roberts went ahead of the rear party to meet John Hunt, so Morris entered Namche to be greeted by: “Good day, Mr. Morris, Major Roberts told us to expect you, said the voice. I looked around to see an enormous bearded Sikh, in some sort of uniform topped by a fur-lined jacket. ‘Please! Come this way, Mr. Tiwari would like to see you’. . . . We entered and climbed a flight of stairs, and there in the dark recesses of an upstairs room was a wireless transmitter. It looked quite a powerful one, and near it was a contraption like a stationary bicycle used to generate its electric power.”

Mr. Tiwari was the Indian police officer in charge of the detachment. He explained that he had been given instructions by the Indian embassy to transmit any urgent messages for the expedition. He communicated with Kathmandu twice a day and invited Morris to send a short message there and then. He explained that it would be received by the Indian embassy and would be delivered to Mr. Summerhayes. Morris obliged but he noted that Tiwari inspected it carefully before asking the operator to transmit it. Morris explains that the detachment was there to cover people coming and going over the Nangpa La, the principal gateway from Tibet into this part of Nepal, with a special responsibility to be alert to Chinese infiltrators. That night, reflecting on Tiwari’s actions and general demeanor, Morris drew up a new code system that would simply communicate that Everest had been climbed and by which members of the team. He knew that if he sent the message “in clear,” the whole world would know its contents long before it reached London. He also knew that Tiwari would be reluctant to pass a message that he could not understand. What was needed was a system of designation that would allow Morris to convey the news in a way that looked intelligible but would mean something different from what was written to the person who held the code. The new code was dispatched to Kathmandu by runner the next morning.

Hillary and Tenzing summited Everest on May 29, 1953. They arrived back at advanced base camp, well above the icefall, in the early afternoon of May 30 to give the news of their successful summit to John Hunt and most of the rest of the climbing team. By chance, Morris had come up to the camp that morning and was able to hear the news at first hand and join in the celebrations. Later that afternoon, along with a member of the team, Mike Westmacott, he left to descend through the icefall to return to base camp. Morris had done little climbing before the expedition, and, as the light faded, he found it increasingly hard going. At one stage he asked Westmacott to go ahead as he needed to rest. He was pulled back to his senses by the sharpest of retorts from Westmacott: “Don’t be so ridiculous!” Morris arrived back in his

tent at base camp worn out. He took some time to recover from his exertions before he typed out in code the most important message of his life: “snow conditions bad stop advanced base abandoned on May 29 stop awaiting improvement stop all well.” The next morning, May 31, he gave the message to one of his runners with instructions to make best speed back to Namche. It was handed to Mr. Tiwari at the checkpost on the morning of June 1 for transmission by Morse code to the base station in the Indian embassy in Kathmandu on the afternoon radio schedule. Late that afternoon a message was delivered to the British embassy, signed by the vice consul at the Indian embassy, Mr. G. R. Joshi. The heading said: “Copy of a Message received from COL HUNT, NAMCHE BAZAR on June 1, 1953.” The message read: “snow conditions bad **hence expedition** abandoned advance base **camp** on 29th **and** awaiting improvement **being** all well.” (The Indians, either at Namche or in the embassy, added the bolded words presumably to make, as they thought, the message clearer.)

In the British embassy, Ambassador Summerhayes deciphered the message using the code, which had been handwritten by Morris on The Times–headed notepaper at the camp above Namche after he had first met Mr. Tiwari. The ten words transmitted to the Foreign Office in London by secure telegraph are given in italics with the code in capitals: Mt Everest climbed [SNOW CONDITIONS BAD] 29 May by Hillary [ADVANCED BASE ABANDONED] and Tenzing [AWAITING IMPROVEMENT] All well. The information arrived in The Times newsroom in time for the afternoon news conference. The layout of the next day’s paper was suitably planned. That evening the news was delivered to the Queen and Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace. The final midnight news bulletin of the BBC Home Service reported the news and every newspaper in the United Kingdom immediately changed its front page to carry the story.



Hillary ["Advanced base abandoned"] and Tenzing ["Awaiting improvement"] on Everest, 1953.

Image: AP

Thus, on the morning of June 2, 1953, the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation at Westminster Abbey, the news was on the streets to much rejoicing. That same morning, having breakfast at a rest stop below Namche, as he headed back to Kathmandu as fast as he could, James Morris caught a BBC news bulletin that declared that Everest had been climbed and that "the news had been first announced in a copyright dispatch in The Times." John Hunt and most of the team arrived back at base camp during the afternoon of June 2. That evening in the mess tent the youngest member of the team, George Band, who two years later with Joe Brown was to make the first ascent of Kanchenjunga, tuned in to All India Radio to hear that the news had been announced the previous evening and that the Queen and prime minister had sent telegrams to the team via the ambassador in Kathmandu. There was much rejoicing that the news had indeed reached London in time for the coronation. In his book, John Hunt, with typical understatement, wrote: "Another jar of rum was called for"!

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In their early days the Indian checkpoints were probably reasonably effective in gathering low level intelligence, but between 1950 and 1970 much changed in the field of intelligence acquisition and particularly in the technique of aerial surveillance. Over the last few years of their existence they became an embarrassment to Nepal and of increasingly limited use to India, of more political and psychological value than anything else. In sum, they had served

their time. In stark contrast, unlike in 1969 when a peremptory demand from the prime minister, Kirti Nidhi Bista, gave Nepal what it was seeking on the checkposts, no such direct approach is likely to work to Nepal's advantage on Lipu Lekh and Kalapani. Nor will engaging China prove to be of much help. Whatever it might say now, China's position on Lipu Lekh is badly compromised by all the MoUs and agreements it has signed unilaterally over many years with India, and not just on trade, with no regard to Nepal's interests or sensitivities. On Kalapani, China's consistent position has been that it is a matter for Nepal and India to resolve.

India must know that no Nepali government is ever likely to accept what is perceived to be India's arbitrarily established border east of Lipu Lekh, but presumably it considers Nepali rancor and continuing protests on this as a price to be paid to secure its position on Kalapani. Given the history and the evidence from the maps, Lipu Lekh does look a difficult case for Nepal to sustain, but even a concession on this is unlikely to improve Nepal's chances of regaining Kalapani. In India's mind, both issues are indissolubly linked and intimately tied to its larger unresolved border dispute with China. Therefore, for India, the relative strength of Nepal's case on both issues is of no consequence. This is what makes the disputes so complex and intractable. The prospect is for a long drawn-out process that is unlikely to give Nepal what it seeks, though some form of palliative words may be agreed at a future stage of negotiation.

“In India's mind, both issues are indissolubly linked and intimately tied to its larger unresolved border dispute with China. Therefore, for India, the relative strength of Nepal's case on both issues is of no consequence.”

On a lighter note, the final word goes to the man, now a woman, who achieved one of the greatest scoops any journalist could ever aspire to. Sitting in his tent at base camp, recovering from his exertions through the icefall, as the words formed in his head, James Morris was well aware that the series of dots and dashes the wireless operator at the Indian checkpost at Namche was shortly to transmit to his embassy in Kathmandu would resonate round the world: “I extracted my typewriter from a pile of clothing and propped it on my knees to write a message. This was that brief dispatch of victory I had dreamed about through the months. Oh, Mr. Tiwari at Namche and Mr. Summerhayes at Kathmandu! Oh, you watchful radio men in Whitehall! Oh, telephone operators, typists and sub-editors, readers, listeners, statesmen, generals, Presidents, Kings, Queens and Archbishops! I have a message for you!”

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I am most grateful to Subhak Mahato for permission to use his photo of the Tinker Pass and to Jamie McGuinness for permission to use his spectacular photo of the Urai Lekh Pass. My thanks also to Jim Fisher for permitting me to use his photo of Malcolm Meerendonk and Dor Bahadur Bista.

Cover photo: Looking north toward Nubri over the village of Setibas, the location of one of the Indian checkposts. The three passes from Nubri into Tibet—Gya La, Lachen, and Lachung—are located a five- to six-day walk away. Sam Cowan