A SHARED PAST DIVIDED BY GEOPOLITICS

They gyrate, some fast and jerky, others in a morecomplex and rhythmic way; their loose robes flowing and flapping around them. The ankle-length colorful gowns, in shades of yellow, blue, red and white, lacedwith decorations of all kinds, blossom like the tutu of aballerina in full flow. A support group plays loud musicalinstruments. Faces behind the masks emote and convey conflicting emotions – divine, exalted, wrathful anddemonic – evoking a strange feeling in the audience.They are alternately charmed into a blessed state andhaunted by a nightmarish vision. The performers danceto the accompaniment of trumpets, horns and cymbals.They often carry play swords, like those in *jatra,*[1] andenact a ghastly execution. Then follow the dancenumbers celebrating the victory of good over evil.

The performers are actually monks staging lama dances.Their lives revolve around the monasteries dotting the entire stretch of the eastern Himalayas from Bhutan, Sikkim, Kalimpong up to Tawang. The monasteries are where they worship, pursue their studies and reside as well. It is a unique culture that unifies this part of the

Buddhist Himalayas, cutting across political boundaries. The folk dances are a living testimony to a long traditionthat flourished along the Himalayas for thousands of years. They are a throwback to the cultural practices from a time before Buddhism arrived in the Himalayas. This cultural strain survived the cross-currents of many developments over the centuries.

Important monasteries in this region – Tasichhodzong in Bhutan, Rumtek in Sikkim, Tawang in Arunachal Pradeshamong others – have nurtured the lama dance in different forms allowing it to diversify according to local conditions. They are performed in different monasteries according to their own calendars. Their esoteric names conjure upa different world and time: Guru Tshengye Cham (Danceof the Four Stags), Dance of Barso, Pa Cham Dance, theDance of the Heroes, Bardo Cham Dance, the Danceof the Peaceful Deities, Zhana Nga Cham Dance. BlackHat Dance portrays the subjugation of enemies by GuruPadmasambhava. Folklores of lamaism that have been told and retold through generations are depicted in thesedances: stories of exorcising devils and celebrations in the wake of the good

spirits vanquishing the evil ones. Finally, God re-emerges after turmoil manifesting Himselfbeatifically to bless the devotees. 'Lama dances typicallysignify the victory of good over evil,' Kunsang, a monkat the Khinmey monastery in Tawang explained to me. He pointed to the thematic affinity of the dance form to the festivals India's mainstream culture thrives on. 'It is something like Ramlila that is staged during Dussehra and the burning of the effigy of Ravana,' he said. The dance-forms evolved in the monasteries of different Buddhist sects have subtle differences that are not lost on the discerning eyes. 'We, too, have a festival of lama dances in the Tawang Monastery for three days in January,' another monk said. I had met him at the main monastery in Tawang. In the Tibetan language the monastery in Tawang is called Galden Namgey Lhatse. 'Various aspects of life are highlighted in the dances, issues of life and death,' he said giving me a tour ofthe Buddhist tradition nestling in this desolate border area where the only activity – barring modest footfallsof tourists and pilgrims – is military, of troop movementsclose to the border with Tibet. One can discern nuancedmessages in the dances, like how people will suffer if theydo evil things, about the day of reckoning at the end of the journey. 'No, we don't have dances depicting the slayingof demons, it's there in the Nyingmapa monasteries,'the monk went on. Guru Padmasambhava had started the Nyingmapa sect. He had slain demons. The sect attached to the Tawang Gompa is known as Gelugpa, founded by Je Tsongkhapa, a 14th century philosopher and Tibetan religious leader. This sect, Buddhists here say, was promoted by the fifth Dalai Lama with the help of the Mongols. Khinmey, on the other hand, is a large Nyingmapa gompa. A gompa, inherent to the concept of Tibetan monastic life and culture, is many things rolled into one. First, it's a fortification to protect the place of worship which is also a seminary of learning and an archive of ancient religious texts, and finally a cultural centre and residence for monks. The young lamas learntheir first Cham steps in the precincts of the gompa.

Among the fabled lama dances in Bhutan is Guru Tshengye Cham that depicts the eight primary manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava and his resulting accomplishments. These dances are meant to thwart demons and evil spirits and prepare the ground for spreading Buddhism in the Himalayas. Besides his appearance as Padmasambhava, the Guru had seven other manifestations: Padmajungney, Singye Dradrog, Dorje Droloe, Nyima Yoedzer, Sakya Singye, LodenChosed and Padma Gyalpo. Among the different avatars of Padmasambhava, those as Guru Singye Dradrog andGuru Dorje Droloe are particularly wrathful. In the two manifestations of anger, he

reputedly defeated forces opposed to dharma. In Buddhism, 'dharma' connotes the nature of reality regarded as a universal truth. This, in other words, is regarded as the essence of Buddhism.Such deities are worshipped in some of the monasteriesin Bhutan. In lama dances, the characters personifying the hostile, inimical forces wear fearsome masks. BardoCham is a dance of peaceful deities. The underlying philosophy of Bardo promotes the idea of a quiet passagebetween death and rebirth. In Tibetan Buddhism, Bardois the uncertain state between one's death and rebirth. Inthat grey area the human soul experiences 'a variety of phenomena'. The concept of Bardo as an undefined zone between death and rebirth, night and day, suffering and relief, emptiness and replenishment has been beautifully treated by the American writer George Sanders in his acclaimed novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*. The air of serenityaround the recital of Bardo Cham affects the audience. The Dance of the Stag and the Hound on the other hand promotes feelings of compassion and love. The Dance of Four Stags once again eulogizes the exploits of Guru Padmasambhava. He, legend has it, once rode a stag inall the four directions – east, west, north and south – andsubdued many evil spirits to bring peace and happinessto his territory. The performers of this dance wear deer masks. Other animals, too, are represented in suchperformances. Along with the tiger, lion, monkey, leopard, the actors assume the form of the mythical dragon as well. These animals represent negative human qualitieslike conceit, malice, hypocrisy and lethargy. Signifying the supremacy of the lion in the animal kingdom, the leaddancer or the Drametse Nga Cham wears the lion mask.Twelve animals which are part of the Bhutanese lunar calendar feature in the dance.

Despite being the purveyor of the right-and-wrong message, the dance recitals are good entertainment, too. In some way they are a reminder of the medieval morality plays in England. Of course for the organizers thereis an urgent need to entertain the devotees who attend religious functions and make the gompa life more interesting for the community. It is necessary to engage their attention. Pangtoed Cham is popular in Sikkim, performed in honour of Mount Khangchendzonga, considered the guardian deity of the locals. This dance isa celebration of the signing of the treaty of blood brotherhood between the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim. Mount Khangchendzonga was a witness to the mythical ceremony supposedly taken place hundreds of years ago. Like every myth, this event, too, has an elementof historical authenticity in it. Such a treaty was indeed signed between the two ethnic groups more than 600 years ago.

‘The dance is still performed so that the spirit of the treaty stays alive,’ Palden Tsering Gyamtso told me in Gangtok. In his seventies now, Tsering Gyamtso, an author and former bureaucrat, once represented Sikkimin Parliament. In 1954-55, performance of the dance wasmade compulsory for the students in senior classes. It was introduced in schools by the diwan of Sikkim, Nari Rustomji, to commemorate the solemn oath taken by Lepchas and Bhutias. It serves as a reminder. ‘In the junior classes I was the lead dancer,’ Palden Tsering Gyamtso said recalling his school days. Pangtoed Chamis a fusion between the folk and lama dances.

A robust cultural stream that incorporates elements like lama dance serves as a common thread running through the communities across the eastern Himalayas.But there are many barriers that have come up over theyears keeping the region divided. This reality dawnedon the inhabitants of Lachung, a picture-postcard ham- let in north Sikkim, like never before on the night of 18 September 2011.

Lachung has often been described as a slice of Switzer-land. The main road through the town winds up to the pic-turesque Yumthang Valley. Surrounded by snow-coveredmountains, the place greets you with fiery rich blossomsof rhododendrons. The Lachung Chu River dances merrily down – its bed strewn with boulders – to meet the Lachen Chu at Chungthang and form the mighty Teesta River. One road goes east steeply up the mountains heading to Katao, on the Tibet border, cutting through lush greenmeadows covered under a carpet of snow that settles inthe upper reaches of the Himalayas in early winter.

This placidly peaceful life was rudely jolted out of its set pattern that night as the hill slopes trembled under the impact of an earthquake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale. Tin sheds of the little huts rattled scarily andtheir thin brick walls collapsed. Those living in the little settlement of Lachung deep inside the mountainousregion of Sikkim rushed out in the open. Panicked, they huddled trying to figure out what caused the wrath of the mountains. For the devout Buddhists, the local gompa is their only solace and refuge from all worldly woes. That night many of them gathered in the open courtyard of the gompa. Little did they know that this was only the beginning of a long night of unearthly turmoil. As the road leading up to Lachung from the district headquarters of Mangan cratered and cavedin at many places, for almost a week the settlementlost touch with the outside world. A stretch of the road collapsed at Chungthang requiring

reconstruction. For the small community it was a real ordeal without food, electricity and mobile networks. Villagers and stranded tourists – among them Bhutias, Lepchas, Nepalis and Bengalis – suffered alike.

Had the road beyond the army camp in Katao been openand the border accessible, as they had been until 1950,people of Lachung could have looked up to Tibet for help. But the Tibet that unfolds beyond those mountain ranges is now part of an undemocratic China, a highly militarized zone. Aid finally came to the stranded peopleof Lachung from the Indian Army.

'Soldiers at the Katao camp came to our rescue, sharingtheir ration with us,' recalled a grateful villager later. Thenthe army choppers rushed from a distant base droppingfood, medicine and drinking water. The army choppers provided the only lifeline between the people cut off in Lachung and the Sikkim administration. Intrepid volunteers from some NGOs managed to trek up the steep hill slopes,skirting the damaged roads, carrying dry food and drugsin their backpacks for the stranded villagers.

When I visited Lachung in October that year, bringing the rear of Sikkim Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling's cavalcade, the unusual tremor and itsaftermath were still the talk of the town. People huddled around their homes – often badly damaged – and shared their experiences, sipping black tea tofight off the cold. On the way up, I saw the pathetic condition of the road and realized why the people of Lachung had turned destitute in the days following the massive earthquake. Rocks precariously poised on the mountain slope adjoining the road made it extremely vulnerable to landslides as it struggled up to north Sikkim from Mangan, going parallel to the course ofthe turbulent Teesta. When the tremor struck, the road was hopelessly blocked. It had taken weeks to clearthe debris and open it to traffic.

'Do you think help would have come more readily hadthe border been accessible?' I asked a group of old men.'The military is sitting on the border, we can't cross it,' one of them said. Despite the old links with Tibet,the new political reality had sunk in. 'Besides, we are Indians, why should we turn to China for seeking help?' Still they fondly reminisced about the days when the road beyond the mountain ranges was not shut behindthe bamboo curtain. Nor was the border impassable likenow. That was Tibet, presided over by the Dalai Lama.The life of the simple folk revolved around raising crops

of wheat, buckwheat and potatoes; yak farming and prayers at monasteries part of the daily routine. Beijingand its communist rulers were way beyond their mentallandscape. And this was Sikkim, the Chogyal's domain. The border was open facilitating an exciting process offree trade and cultural exchange. Commerce flourished along with a lively interaction between the people fromeither side at many levels. The economic and spiritual links were indeed strong. 'The mule track would begin at Lachung,' recalled an ancient-looking Lachungpa. 'We would start walking at daybreak and reach Shasima in Tibet by the evening crossing the high pass – Tankara La – on the way. Our cargo of apples, rice and sugar was carried on horseback. In Tibet, they would offer us wool to bring back.' Barter was brisk and booming.

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An earthquake that disrupted life in the remote Sikkim area was not an everyday occurrence. But for more than1,500 villages in Arunachal Pradesh close to the border with China, dislocation and disruption happens on a daily basis. Every new day is a struggle for them. People are forced to leave the isolated, inaccessible areas for the district headquarters, the state capital of Itanagar or the plains of Assam, looking for livelihood and conveniences of life. A report on the border area development programme by Arunachal Pradesh Government offers interesting details of such migration.[2] It echoes what a Baptist pastor in Tawang told me about Taksing, his native place in Upper Subansiri district.

'There is no road to my village,' Giokia Madam said. 'You can reach there only by a helicopter. You get the chopper from Ziro,' the pastor got into the details. 'Fromour village, we can see the Chinese troops playing volleyball. There is only a river in between.'

Rajiv Bhattacharya, a journalist in Guwahati, had gone trekking to Taksing in October 2015; but he could not reach the destination. 'The road is dangerous, riskier than tracks in Patkai Hills in Myanmar,' he recalled.'We had to turn back; another two days and we would have reached Taksing.' When he was there, the General Reserve Engineering Force was busy extending theroad up to Taksing.

Had it been a day before 1950 when People's LiberationArmy of China invaded Tibet, the trekkers could have crossed over to the other side, enjoyed a brief stay thereand bought home a few things as mementos. But the Line of Actual Control along which the Chinese troops keep a constant vigil, turns the disputed border into an impassable barrier.

Prior to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, for people living in the Himalayas, dependence had been mutual on either side of the great mountain range. Kalimpong is a good example of such interdependence. In the1950s it was the main centre of Tibetan trade. In those days it was a town humming with business, drawing people from different nationalities and cultures. European travellers, Indian businessmen, Tibetan and Bhutanese traders would mingle together in the town square and market areas. It was a meeting point for commerce, culture and politics as well. In the days ofthe Raj, the town played host to members of the Tibetan ruling elite seeking political asylum in the wake of turmoil back home.

In its troubled relations with imperial China, Tibet had experienced political unrest and faced pressure. The situation reached an acute stage after the collapse of the Qingdynasty in China in 1912. The Provisional Government of the Republic of China did not recognize Tibet's pro-tectorate status offered by the Qing rulers. Again, Tibet was a British protectorate as well. And to complicate thesituation further, several Tibetan representatives signed an agreement with Mongolia to ensure the independenceof their territory from Chinese suzerainty. In the middle of such uncertainty, important members of the Tibetan ruling regime and court aristocracy had to seek political asylum outside their country. Kalimpong was their favoured destination since they knew refuge in British Indiawould ensure their safety. Among such visitors from Lha-sa was the 13th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobzang Thubten Gyamtso. He stayed in the newly built Bhutan House in Kalimpong for three months in 1912 as the guest of Raja Ugyen Dorji and his sister Ayi Thubten Wongmo.

This comforting tale ended abruptly as relations be-tween India and China deteriorated in the second halfof the 1950s. Concerns over Chinese reinforcements in Tibet grew. Deep disquiet in Tibet over the Chinese occupation led to an uprising in 1959 prompting guerrilla groups to build resistance. The 14th Dalai Lama, the present Tibetan spiritual head, fled Lhasa that year making an audacious journey of

border crossing. He was only 23 then. His was one of history's greatest escapes. Ac-cording to Tibetan accounts, the Chinese officials had invited him to attend a dance recital in their army camp unaccompanied by his bodyguards. The strange condition made his inner circle suspicious. Hundreds of his followers assembled outside his palace in Lhasa and began protesting against the Chinese. The close advisors told the Dalai Lama to flee.

On 17 March 1959, disguised as a Chinese soldier he left his palace mingling among the protesters. This was a most daring and sensational escapade given the ruthlessness of the Chinese military. Once they realized thatthe prize bird had flown out of the cage the Chinese mounted a fierce manhunt combing every inch of the Tibetan plateau. They pressed into action 50,000 soldiers and planes to scan every bit of the land. The 23-year- old travelled only by night riding a white pony. Reporting the great escape, Time magazine in 1959 quoted his followers who believed that he 'had been screened from Red planes by mist and low clouds conjured up by the prayers of Buddhist holy men'.

As a consequence, trade with Tibet ended in 1961 when the border was sealed. China tightened its control over Tibet which is also the native land of Bhutias. Bhutias had come down from Tibet three centuries ago to colonize Sikkim. It had always been known as the 'Forbidden Land'. Now it became forbidden to its own people, too. One day Lachungpas, too, found the Katao border closed with the troops detailed along it. Families were separated, properties lost. With gun positions and bunkers glaring intimidatingly, the border bristled as troops of the two giant neighbours were deployed in strength, gripped by tension, ready to confront each other eyeball to eyeball. Mules no longer carried wool from Tibet coming through Jelep La down to Kalimpong, but soldiers laden with arms, go up to the China border. Disputes over the line of control replaced haggling over prices of merchandise. In those days, Sikkim was still the domain of the Chogyals; but by virtue of the treaty of 1950, India obtained the prerogative of taking over responsibility of defence and territorial integrity of Sikkim. The Indian government also acquired the right to station troops anywhere within Sikkim. Because of its strategic importance, over the past 50 years, roads have developed, olive-green jeeps and trucks have replaced the mules and the iron curtain brought down over the busy scene of border points buzzing with barter and noise of sheep and mules. Onneither side the troops have budged an inch.

While announcing the decision to upgrade Kalimpong from a sub-division to a district, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced a ` 220-crore pack- age for building roads in Kalimpong, to quote her, 'from Sevoke to Sikkim'. On a visit to Kalimpong in early 2017, I found parts of the Old Silk Route between Kalimpong and Pedong being widened in stretches. The sceneof frenetic activity made me curious: Will the wheelsof trade roll again down the road that once connected Kalimpong to Tibet? The answer lies in the future. In recent years, only the Nathu La has been opened to a limited amount of border trade.

Behind the muzzles of machine guns and mortars deployed along an inhospitable border are hidden stories of human suffering. Families had to pay a heavy price for the snapping of ties on either side of the border. Travelling to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, I learnt from the monks about separations, brutal repression and loneliness of exile. About 50 km north of Tawang on the Line of Actual Control is Bum La, a difficult pass. In 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama escaped from Lhasa through this route. Now it is the venue for meetings between the officers of the Indian and Chinese armies twice a year. 'Less than a century ago, people used this border as an avenuefor travel and trade between Tawang and the adjoining areas in Tibet,' Lobsang Tengyel, a monk, said.

The same sentiments were echoed about unnatural separation at the Urgeyling monastery. 'Salt and clotheswould come from Tibet as items of trade,' an old timer recalled. 'Vegetables would go from this side. Now no one goes to Tibet,' a veteran trader said. The border dispute has divided the Monpa families, natives of Arunachal Pradesh. They have lost contact with their relatives trapped in Tibet.

At the Tawang Gompa, I met a 70-year-old monk who has relatives in Tibet. 'I grew up in Terang, a village nearLhasa,' he told me in broken Hindi. 'We came from Tibeta month after the flight of the Dalai Lama. When our family fled, my brother stayed back. He is now dead, but his children are there. One of his sons is now in the Chineseborder guard. I used to talk to them over the phone, but now you cannot call Tibet anymore. I can't talk to them,'he said, his face scrunched up in pain over separation and lost links. The monk is a Monpa. His family originally belonged to a village near Urgeyling. His father had gone to Tibet to study Buddhism.

They use all possible opportunities to re-establish the old contacts, trace back family friends separated byhistory. While in Gangtok, I had met Tibetan refugees who kept going back to places inside Tibet now that border trade between India and China had reopened through Nathu La, to look for their long-separated friends and relatives. Refugee families engaged in trade would go to the border with their merchandise; their relatives would come from what is now officially called the Tibet Region of China. They would meet at the trade mart. 'You can mention our names in your newspaper articles, but please do not give away the names of our relatives in Tibet,' they pleaded. 'If the Chinese authorities come to know that they are keepingin touch with us, they will be harassed.'

The Border Personnel Meetings, though strictly betweenthe officers of the two armies, turn out to be big gatherings of ordinary people from either side. I saw at close quarters the proceedings of two such BPMs in Bum La. 'The flag meetings at border points give us an opportunity to talk to the locals, know about their issues,' an officertold me. People from Tsona come to the border from theChinese side. From Tawang, too, people get there. 'We take with us the prasad of the Dalai Lama, people back in Tibet cherish such offerings,' a monk told me in Tawang. The army however demurs insisting that access to the venues of the BPMs is severely restricted.

True, tensions between the two Himalayan neighbours have further divided a region already barriered by geography. From ancient times the Himalayas have been the playground for bitter power rivalry between small kingdoms and big empires, colonizing forces and nationalists. The contending forces represented different linguistic groups, races and cultures. High mountainridges and deep canyons offered natural resistance to the mighty armies out to colonize weaker kingdoms, overrunning lush valleys, places steeped in spiritual traditions and booming trade centres. Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkimand some places within Arunachal Pradesh were distinct political entities that had even fought fierce battles with each other. Religion – particularly Buddhism in the context of the eastern Himalayas – however, has beena unifying factor. Perhaps because of its pacifist message, it has let the neighbours coexist instead of pitting them against each other. Unlike other strategically crucial mountainous regions at the meeting point of great powers – Afghanistan for instance – the eastern Himalayas have not flared up in internecine violence. For centuries,

monks trekked along the numerous mountain passes to faraway places spreading the message of theEnlightened One and connecting civilizations. From the ancient Indian centres of learning like Nalanda, Buddhism travelled first to Tibet and then spread to places on the southern Himalayan slopes of Sikkim, Bhutan and the present-day Arunachal Pradesh, particularly its western parts. Trade routes opened up, not only linking these regions with Tibet in the north, but also promoting exchanges between the neighbours on the southern plains. The region also had a history of feuds and rivalries between different Buddhist denominations. At times armies marched out, leading to wars and conquests, butnever disrupting the links. The Buddhist Himalayas had developed a common identity under the influence of the religion and its culture of tolerance. Gradually Buddhismushered in a new civilization, starting in its wake the process of migration – of people moving from one place to another to settle down. As a corollary, trade and commerce followed, making the eastern Himalayan regiona separate economic entity as well. Even tribes living in the eastern parts of Arunachal Pradesh which had been beyond the pale of Buddhism, have a long history of trading with Tibet in the north and the Indian foothills in the south. This entire social and economic arrangementgot jolted by the border dispute.

The advent of the British and their forays into the hills gavea new twist to the power politics of the trans-Himalayan region as the new rulers usurped the role of overlords. As a consequence of the British policy of interference, the demographic profiles of the hills and valleys beyond began to change. In the wake of immigration from alien cultures, new religions began to create enclaves on the southern slopes of the Himalayas – Hinduism in particular and Christianity to a lesser extent. Largely owing to the pacifist nature of Buddhism the arrival of the new religions did not trigger tension or lead to any hostility between the communities; they accommodated each other. The prevailing peace in the mountains was rudely jolted by the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950followed by the border war between China and Indiain 1962. Seen closely, this situation had its roots in the imperialist policy of the British. But the consequencesof the developments were terrible for the people livingin the mountainous region for centuries. Social contactswere lost, so were important trade links. To complete the picture of disruption, refugees kept pouring into the Indian side of the border after dangerous border crossingfrom Tibet. What had earlier been just a mountain pass to cross over to the valley beyond, became a potential flashpoint across an impassable line of actual control. But the British presence in the Himalayas had its positive side too. ‘We don’t have tea and we don’t

have the railways either because the British never set footin Bhutan,' a senior Bhutanese diplomat said during a conversation with me. The Darjeeling hills owe to the British both its tea industry and the toy train services, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a great tourist attraction. True, the colonial rulers brought the railways to Darjeeling for integrating their administrative and business establishments in the hills.

The fissure along the line of control running through the crest of the mountain ranges has many ramifications forthe people of the region. With Tibet trade coming to an end, the economy of the hills has suffered; flourishing urban centres like Kalimpong have stagnated. Important think tanks propose steps to increase trade and enhance cultural exchange between India and China. Track II diplomacy has been resorted to as a way of normalizing relations keeping the boundary dispute on the backburner. However, in such backchannel activity what remainsmissing is an appreciation of the situation facing the people in the Himalayan region. Even for the migrants from Tibet who have run away in the face of Chinese repression, life has become more difficult. With the borderguarded by the two militaries, for the persecuted Tibetans the road to India has become more dangerous. The mountain passes in Arunachal Pradesh and those linkingChumbi Valley to Sikkim and Kalimpong are closer to themain urban centres in Tibet such as Lhasa and Xigaze. Now they have to make a long detour by sneaking into Nepal. With the Chinese border guards pursuing them, escape has become riskier.

The turbulent events in Tibet between 1951 and 1959 following the Chinese occupation of the plateau and the India-China border war proved cataclysmic for thoseliving in north Sikkim, Darjeeling, Bhutan and particularlyin the Tawang tract of Arunachal Pradesh. The closure of the border meant denial of direct access for Tibetans to Kalimpong and Bhutan, the two regions in the easternHimalayas linked together historically and culturally. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took this route to Thimphu in 1958. In those days when infrastructure was poor, he alongwith daughter Indira Gandhi travelled on horseback. To enter Bhutan, one had to cross over into Chumbi Valley, which had come under Chinese occupation with the entryof the People's Liberation Army into Tibet. Nehru crossedthe border at Nathu La to enter Chumbi Valley. There is aplaque at the pass to commemorate the event. When the border was sealed, this route fell into disuse too. The road from Kalimpong to Bhutan now is circuitous, longer and, therefore, more arduous, across Coronation Bridge and the plains of Dooars.

For the Monpas of Tawang, the closure of the border meant not only disruption of trade links but also snappingof vital spiritual and cultural ties. The Tawang Monastery,at the centre of the little Buddhist settlement in that remotearea perched high up in the Himalayas at an altitude of 10,000 ft, serves as an important link, both historical andreligious, to the Drepung monastery in Lhasa. Exchanges were regular between the Tawang Gompa and the TsonaDzong monastery further north in Tibet. An old trade routefrom Tibet came down to Udalguri on the plains of Assam through Tawang. Apart from a shared history, there are similarities in topography, flora and fauna between the two places across the border. On the way to Tawang, asone crosses the Nechiphu range of hills and approaches Bomdila, the changes become visible: firs and pinesreplace the more familiar trees and yaks are seen grazing. Even the domesticated yaks in these hills can be bad- tempered as they charge at strangers at times.

The worsening of relations between India and China had a special meaning for Tawang. During the Chinese incursion of 1962, the Tawang sector bore the brunt of the Chinese assault. Following the withdrawal of the Chinese army – partially, according to the Indian authorities – and the reoccupation of Tawang by the Indian troops, the border became impassable. Tawang turned virtually into a garrison town. The situation hasnever eased since then. In 1987, when I visited Tawang after the Sumdurong Chu crisis that had flared up the year before, the headquarters of two army divisions hadmoved up to the small settlement of Tawang, with their brigades and battalions fanned out further up in the hills. Aksai Chin in the western sector has also been in the eye of the storm. But the pains of disruption caused by the border dispute have been more acute in the eastern sector which is more thickly populated. Elsewhere in Arunachal Pradesh, too, the border dispute snappedthe traditional links across the mountain passes.

Extension of the British dominion to the mountains marked the gradual erosion of the Chogyal's authorityin Sikkim. After India's independence, growing assertionof New Delhi in Gangtok culminated in the annexationof Sikkim in 1975. The process of slow retreat of the marginalized indigenous population to the northern part of the state had started with the advent of the British. The highest concentration of Lepchas in Sikkim today isin the remote Lepcha Reserve in Dzongu, close to the Khangchendzonga biosphere reserve bordering Nepal.

Lachen and Lachung, abutting the Tibet plateau, arean enclave of Bhutias. As a result of rapid population growth, the Chogyals, had tried to protect vital interests of their subjects while signing the instrument of annexation with India. This led to the formation of a category called the Sikkim Subjects, one of a kind in the country, with their unique problems and aspirations, and legal provisions meant to protect their interests.

Geography has put the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan ina piquant situation. Hemmed in as it is on two sides by two giant and squabbling neighbours, the country had never come under direct British rule and continued to preserve its secluded existence till the middle of the 20th century. In the initial years after the departure of the British from the subcontinent, Bhutan played cool to Indian overtures, shutting its doors to the outside world. The momentous changes in Tibet between 1951 and 1959 after the entry of the Chinese, and the pervasive fear thatthe Buddhist values were under threat, finally prompted Bhutan to make up its mind to tilt towards India.

The India-China boundary dispute has cast its long shadow on Bhutan which is yet to settle its own border issues with China. In finalizing the demarcation of its border with China, Bhutan needs to keep in mind the sensibilities of its old ally India. The little kingdom cannotdisregard the bearing that the final settlement of its out- standing border issues with China will have on India's overall security concerns. Tensions that escalated over the sudden movement of Chinese troops on the Doklamplateau in 2017 were a pointer to the dilemma Bhutan faces. Global concerns over the standoff provoking reinforcement of the Indian position on the border werea measure of Doklam's strategic location – between Ti- bet's Chumbi Valley to the north, Bhutan's Ha Valley to the east and Sikkim to the west. In the recent years, China has been prodding Bhutan to open diplomatic ties with it. Bhutan again has to weigh carefully Indian sensibilities before acceding to such overtures. Despite the possibility of economic benefits that such ties promise, Bhutan reckons the danger of dealing with an undemocratic regime which is both authoritarian and ruthless. Tibet serves as a glaring example of the consequences of being in China's crosshairs.

Of course, Indo-Bhutan relations are also undergoing a slow transformation. Bhutan now has more elbow room compared to what the situation was a decade ago. Un- der the treaty of friendship signed between the two countries in 1949, Bhutan had agreed to be guided

by India in its external relations. Under the revised Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty signed in 2007, the two countries'shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests'.[4] Informal exchanges be- tween Bhutan and China have been more frequent in the recent years. In keeping with the new proximity, the footfalls of Chinese tourists in Bhutan have gone up significantly. Buddhist values to which Bhutan is wedded stand, however, in the way of too intimate relations with China. It would also be difficult for Bhutan to normalize trade ties with China till the boundary dispute is settled.

A few irritants and lingering doubts notwithstanding, winds of change are blowing over the snow-crestedpeaks of the eastern Himalayas. Old cultural traits are being rediscovered for a new purpose; lama dances for instance. In the olden days they were staged to ward offthe evil spirit. Now lama dances in Bhutan are a great tourist attraction. They draw big crowds of visiting foreigners at important places like the Tashichho Dzong Tsechu and Paro Tsechu. Holidayers from different partsof the world gather in large numbers for a lama dance recital. The calendar of this ritual often coincides with themain tourist seasons in Bhutan. The Tashichho Dzong Tsechu is held in October, the Paro Tsechu in March.

With social mobility, newer dance forms are capturing theimagination of people. At Clock Tower Square in Thimphu,the Bhutanese capital, I saw a programme drawing a large crowd of youths. Along with Bhutanese, Chinese and Tibetandances – suggestive of the mélange that Bhutanese culture today is – the youths also presented Western dances. Songswith lyrics in the Bhutanese language were sung in the tuneof pop music. The event organized by a few businesseswas intended to promote a line of products, an indication of how social mores are changing in the Himalayan regionas modern influences flow in from the outside world. Discos are thriving in Thimphu and Paro. Even Lhasa boasts of nightclubs and live music.

Economies are also getting transformed as much inSikkim and Bhutan as in Tibet. Lhasa and the other urban centres in Tibet have turned from medieval towns into modern cities under Chinese rule. Tibet has witnessed an explosive growth in terms of connectivity and infrastructure. Shiny, smooth, multilane highways crisscross the region. The Qinghai-Tibet railway that covers almost 2000 km of extremely difficult terrain with an average altitude of 3379 m. is partly built on permafrost. This technological marvel is a sure sign of Beijing's

anxiety to put an end to Tibet's quaint culture nestling in the Buddhist tradition, and take it out into theChinese mainstream of new affluence.

Assistance from India in its economic plans has helpedBhutan embark on the road to modernity. Over the past two decades, Sikkim has clocked impressive growth andis considered a model state in the Northeast. The state has emerged as an education hub and a destination for industries. Even in Arunachal Pradesh, still wrapped in remoteness and inaccessibility, development prompted by defence requirements - roads, bridges and helipads – has come in handy for the civilian population as well. For the economy of Kalimpong, a town that is yet to recover fully from the closure of Tibet trade in 1962, the presence of a large army contingent in and around town has hastened development. The defence installations have given Kalimpong a much larger focus than it wouldhave got as a hill station.

The question that still remains is whether the growth Tibetand the Himalayan region this side of the border have achieved does justice to their potential and if it is inclusive. Has the growth bypassed large sections of population inthe region? Has it been achieved at the expense of the hill people? Tibetans have accused China of demographic aggression, claiming their language, tradition and very existence are under threat because of the waves of newsettlers swamping them with an alien Han Chinese culture. Sikkim's demographic profile, too, has changed. Butreassuringly, such changes have not posed any visible threat to the social fabric of the state. Unlike some othernortheastern states, Sikkim has not been tormented by either a major ethnic crisis or insurgency. The reason for its social stability is sections of the indigenous population have got a share of the developmental pie. Bhutias holdhigh offices in the bureaucracy and police; Lepchas havea significant share of jobs in the government sector.

Development rather than ethnic issues has spelled troubleforSikkim. The hydropower projects coming up in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh have sparked protests and resistancefrom people affected by displacement. Hydroelectricity, the locals fear, benefits the faraway cities and industriesmore than the adjoining areas. The giant projects come up at the cost of the surrounding villages for generating revenue while basic issues like roads and employment for the locals remain unaddressed. Development projects handed down from the top have their limitations; they donot often address the problems at the ground level. The development experiences in Sikkim and the neighboring Darjeeling hills of West Bengal are an eye-opener. Sikkim has made

good use of the liberal financial assistance fromDelhi to move ahead of Darjeeling. Yet, by conventionaleconomic logic, Darjeeling, with its locational advantageand European influence should have been way ahead. 'Itis not surprising, for developing Sikkim was a high priority,'a former officer of an elite intelligence agency told me. What he hinted at is the strategic importance of Sikkim inthe context of the Sino-Indian border dispute.

For all its strategic importance, the economy of Arunachal Pradesh continues to be sluggish; for the ordinary people,life is hard. At Bomdila one winter evening, I saw a long queue of people outside a ration shop offering foodstuff at a subsidized rate as part of the government's public distribution system (PDS). It was getting dark but more people were still rushing to the shop. 'They sell rice throughthis outlet only three days in a month,' a man waiting in the queue said. 'On those days people rush here leavingall other work.' He gave me the minutiae of the commonman's life in Bomdila. 'They give (a family) only four litres of kerosene a month,' he said. 'This is not enough. There arelong power cuts. We need kerosene to light our houses and cook food on the stove.' People in the towns dependon subsidized rice supplied through the PDS network. That evening, when PDS rice was sold at `13 a kg, in theopen market the price was `20 a kg. The mad rush to theration shop for moderately cheaper rice was indicative of the people's purchasing power.

In the hill areas of Darjeeling district, two development councils have been constituted – the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and its successor, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration – as a measure of local autonomy. The ideawas to let the hill people participate in the development process. But the two representative bodies have failed to achieve the goal of inclusive development. The lacunaeseem to be lying in their conception. One persistent com-plaint is that neither of the two councils – formed under theActs of the state government – has really been delegatedenough powers. The two local political outfits running thecouncils – Gorkha National Liberation Front and GorkhaJanmukti Morcha – allege funds meant for the bodies have been diverted to other uses. The Government of West Bengal on the other hand accuses the bodies of failing to utilize the money sent to Darjeeling. Again, some ofthe earliest settlers in the hills have a feeling of being leftout not having enough numbers to capture the councils.

In a deft move, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee

responded to the grievances of Lepchas, the oldest settlers in this part of the Himalayas, by constituting a separate development board for them with direct funding from the state government. Lepchas had been aggrieved about their language and culture not getting the official recognition in the hills of Darjeeling. Sharing their concern, in February 2017, Banerjee constituted a separate body for them. The Lepcha Development Board has been followed up by a host of similar bodies for the other hill communities. Leaders of the Hill Council repudiated the government action as a 'political move' to divide the communities living in the hills and weaken the movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland comprising the hill areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Indeed, to have fifteen development boards on top of a Hill Council for Darjeeling and Kalimpong is like mixing chaos with confusion. The reason the smaller social groups lapped up the chief minister's offer was their distressed economic condition. The Lepchas of Sikkim seem to be better off than their Darjeeling counterparts.

This region has potential which, if tapped, can result in impressive growth in trade and commerce. To achieve this end, market forces must be allowed free play un- hindered by boundary disputes and regulations. With its growing population and a large market, Tibet offers a host of opportunities for a new spurt in business throughout the region. Through the excellent road and railway net- works inside Tibet, trade links can be established with the larger markets in the Chinese mainland. With its history of Tibet trade, Kalimpong can benefit if commerce with Tibet grows. Prosperity for Kalimpong would have a cascading effect on the other parts of the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim. Trading with the Tibet region of China can bring economic benefit to the people of Arunachal Pradesh as well. The Walong area in the extreme east of Arunachal Pradesh is pretty close to the prosperous Yunan province of China.

Economic prosperity has its own logic and momentum often serving as a counterweight to geopolitical obstacles standing in the way of normalization of relations. One spinoff of normalization and easing of restrictions will be growth of tourism in this region which boasts of unparalleled natural beauty. If Tibet is opened to tourism through the eastern Himalayas, there would be a rapid increase in the flow of international tourists to Sikkim, Kalimpong, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Of course there will be a lot of concern about protecting the rich biodiversity and pristine culture of the sensitive Himalayan region. Preserving the culture and lifestyle of the colourful people in the

secluded mountainous region is a higher priority than the lucre of a tourism boom. Thesewould have to be factored in any project for promoting trade, commerce as well as tourism. A steady flow of middle-class tourists from within South Asia may be a sustainable crowd, but waves of international tourists with plastic money might spell ecological disaster.

The road networks and other infrastructure that have already come up in the Himalayan region to meet the defence requirements may well be used for a more productive purpose: boosting its economic development. Some of these are already being usedfor the welfare of people living in the region. Like the advance landing grounds coming up in Arunachal Pradesh to supply troops with essential requirements in areas where there are no roads. The ALGs are coming inhandy for the locals who, too, do not have the means toprocure their requirements from the outside world. Thereare many instances of facilities developed to meet war- time exigencies being used for development purposes later. The mathematical tool of linear programming, for instance. It was developed during the World War II to helpin the war efforts of the US Army and Air Force. Now itis an essential tool in the process of economic decision-making. Closer home, Stilwell Road, constructed in the period between 1942 and 1944 to enable the Alliedpowers to send supplies to Kuomintang China from Assam through Burma, can facilitate economic and cultural ties between the northeastern region of India and the Yunnan province in southwest China. The sameway facilities that have already come up on either sideof the Himalayan divide can boost trans-Himalayan trade, commerce and cultural exchanges, provided the boundary dispute between India and China is settled.