



The 1962 war in Tawang: A View from the Ground

Speaker: Col. Ajai Shukla

Chair: Prof. Patricia Uberoi

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Venue: Seminar Room, ICS, New Delhi

Prof. Patricia Uberoi, the chair, welcomed Col. Ajai Shukla and pointed out that the talk would be helpful in presenting a unique view of the border conflict between India and China in 1962 with the help of the ethnographic accounts of decaying memories of the populace in Tawang.

Col. Shukla began the presentation as a part of his ongoing book project with his wife, Ms. Sonia Shukla. He enumerated numerous problems that he faced during his research, on the subject because it was difficult for him to condense the information about the war that had two decades long buildup which lasted for a month and had an ever-lasting impact on geo-political, social, economic and military dimensions in the region, and between the two countries in particular. According to him, earlier research did not adequately dwell on the oral accounts of the experience of the local inhabitant and then serving officials and also local archives to study the most contested month long conflict in Tawang sector between India and China

The presentation focused on the following aspects:

1. **The Monpas and 1962 conflict:** The Monpas are the one of the border communities in Tawang who had played an important role in creating an effective network at the border. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) tried to win over the Monpa's hearts and minds through appeasement during a month-long occupation on *Monyul*, the land of Monpas. Although the PLA forces retreated after a month of occupation, the speaker argues that there was

a 'suspicious relationship' between the Monpas and the Indian officials, after the Indian regained its control over the region.

2. **Difficulty of locating the McMahon Line on the ground:** Though the speaker had spent considerable time in the region conducting fieldwork, the topography of the terrain in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh makes it difficult to locate the watersheds. These watersheds were the reference point for the McMahon line between India and China (Tibet then) post the Simla Accord in 1914. During the 1962 conflict, many of these watershed area villages were places of confrontation and villages like Margo through which the PLA soldiers entered completely outflanked the Indian soldiers in Sela and Dirang.

According to the speaker, the Indo-Sino border dispute came into the limelight only when the then Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai wrote a letter to the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 23 January 1959 acknowledging that there is an unresolved border dispute between the two countries. He is also skeptical of the role of Indian government in helping Dalai Lama escape, in terms of serious political concerns in Lhasa or just granting political asylum. He also recalled some of the oral accounts from the local people and officials who were involved in the events that resulted in 1962 Indo-Sino war including the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet.

One of the highlights of the seminar was when Col. Shukla narrated accounts of Harminder Singh, who was assigned the responsibility to escort Dalai Lama from Tawang, and was supposed to build camps throughout the way for almost nine days to reach Bomdila. The escape also resulted in inflow of 70,000 to 80,000 of Tibetan refugees to India that created economic constraints. The escape route planned by the Indians saved Bhutan from the Chinese fury. The speaker also talked about Rashid Yousuf Ali, one of the 1962 war veterans, according to him, the aftermath of 1959 Tibet Uprising, and the wars looming in the region made the situation ripe for Indian administration movements towards Tawang and occupy forward locations in Bomdila and also Sela pass occupying the Tawang McMahon Line. However, Prime Minister Nehru, Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon and BN Malik overruled the plan, which clearly indicates that Indian armed forces were not ready for the confrontation with well-equipped Chinese army.

Based on his interactions with the local inhabitants in the Indo-Sino border, Col. Shukla also gives accounts about how they spent hours sitting at border making sketch of Chinese camps to help Indian forces. This was done to re-locate the troops and plan the attack in advance. There were other accounts drawing a comparison between the Indian and Chinese armies talking about how military preparedness of the Chinese forces as compared to Indian counterparts.

The speaker concluded his presentation by reading out the oral account of a person who shared his journey with the speaker from being a hostage of Chinese army to becoming an interpreter for the invading PLA. The account also tells us about the desperate efforts made by the Chinese Army to make impression on the Monpas by deciding not to cause any harm to the locals and instead, helping them even in domestic chores before leaving and promising to return within next three years.

During the Q&A session, the speaker was asked whether the Chinese were successful in winning the hearts and minds of the locals. Col. Shukla answered by pointing that the Monpas did not cooperate well with the Chinese and therefore, they did not succeed in winning hearts and minds of the Monpas. Another question asked was whether the speaker interviewed any monk from the Tawang Monastery who witnessed the confrontation between the two forces at Tawangto which the speaker responded that their accounts were not that reliable and were very different from the oral accounts of the local people.

About the Speaker

Ajai Shukla is a journalist and commentator on strategic affairs, who writes for Business Standard newspaper. He also hosts a defence blog, *Broadsword*, which attracts 3,000-6,000 readers daily. He is collaborating with Sonia Shukla -- an Adjunct Fellow with the Institute of Chinese Studies -- on an account of the lived experience of the local Tawang people of India's arrival and consolidation in that area soon after independence. Earlier, as a war correspondent for NDTV, he reported from conflict zones like Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, J&K and India's northeast. Ajai served in the Indian Army from 1979-2001, including in Tawang. He graduated from Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1979, and did his post-graduation from King's College, London in 1996-97.

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Report prepared by Shristi Singh, Research Intern, ICS.

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