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*Producing Monyul as Buffer: Spatial politics in a colonial frontier**

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh, northeast India, collectively known as Monyul. It was ruled by Tibet for three centuries before the 1914 McMahon Line boundary included it in India. Even after that, cross-border exchanges between Monyul and Tibet continued until the 1962 Sino-Indian war, following which border passages between the two were closed. Today, Monyul is a marginal region, geographically distant from centres of industry and education, and lacking in terms of infrastructure. This article traces Monyul's marginality not simply to the border war, but to spatial practices of the British colonial state, beginning with the mapping of the boundary in 1914. It shows how Monyul was constructed as a buffer, despite being within a delimited boundary, first, by excluding it from regular administration, and, secondly, by pushing back the older Tibetan administration, thereby, making it (what I call) a 'zone of difference/indifference'. But the buffer project was subject to contestation, mostly from the Tibetan religious aristocracy, whose temporal hold over, and material interests in, Monyul were challenged by the latter's incorporation into colonial India.

* This article is based on archival work undertaken in the National Archives, Delhi, in 2010 and the British Library, London, in 2015. However, the ideas and arguments that I propose emerged from my anthropological engagement with the Monyul region in northeast India. I conducted fieldwork in Monyul in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2013, supported by the Wenner Gren Foundation, USA, and Emory University, USA. Archival work in the British Library in July 2015 was supported by a Charles Wallace India Trust fellowship. I thank Professors Bruce Knauft, David Nugent, Joyce Flueckiger, Willem van Schendel, Toni Huber, and Michael Peletz for their comments on this article. I am grateful to the kind anonymous reviewer for constructive criticisms and insightful suggestions.

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Introduction

Monyul is a sleepy region in the eastern Himalayan slopes on the Indo-Tibetan border. Comprising the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India, Monyul came to prominence in 1962 during the Sino-Indian boundary war, when Chinese troops temporarily occupied it for two months. Known more for its medieval Buddhist monasteries, forested hills, and scenic lakes, Monyul hardly comes across as a 'coveted piece of real estate'.[1] Poor public infrastructure, treacherous roads, and harsh mountain conditions have given Monyul an image of a remote backwater. Yet, remoteness is not a fixed quality of space determined by geographical distance alone, but is socially constructed.[2] In this article, I draw a connection between Monyul's present remoteness and colonial buffer policies of the early twentieth century. I argue that, eager to protect the insecure northeastern frontiers of India, the British invented Monyul as a buffer or barrier against the perceived threat of Chinese expansionism.

I further argue that the making of Monyul as a buffer territory between two states was a spatial fix—a territorial resolution to the tensions of imperial conflict.[3] While Tibet was a buffer between Britain and China for a considerable time,[4] Monyul became a double buffer in British imperialist deliberations in the early twentieth century.[5]

'Monyul' is a Tibetan term meaning lowlands and 'Monpa', meaning lowlander, is a generic term used by Tibetans to refer to the Buddhist

[1] Y. P. Rajesh, 'Buddhist enclave holds key to China-India row', 18 August 2006, http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=13582, [accessed 11 February 2019].

[2] Swargajyoti Gohain, 'Selective access or how states make remoteness', 2016, http://allegralaboratory.net/selective-access-or-how-states-make-remoteness/, [accessed 11 February 2019]. Revised and reprinted as 'Selective Access or How States Make Remoteness', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, forthcoming in 2019.

[3] Harvey, 'Globalization and the Spatial Fix', pp. 23–30.

[4] Lamb, *The McMahon Line*.

[5] With regard to India's eastern frontiers, many scholars have written about the colonial construction of boundaries. See Chatterji, 'The Fashioning of a Frontier'; Choudhury, *The North-East Frontier of India*; Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*; and Zou and Kumar, 'Mapping a Colonial Borderland'. About the historical events leading to the delineation of the McMahon Line boundary between India and China in 1914, see Choudhury, *The North-East Frontier of India*; Gupta, 'The McMahon Line'; Hoffman, 'Rethinking the Linkage'; Lamb, *The McMahon Line*; Maxwell, 'China and India'; Mehra, *The North-Eastern Frontier*, Vol. II; Murty, 'Tawang and "the Un-negotiated Dispute"'; and Sperling 'The Politics of History'.

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communities who inhabit this region, although the latter differ widely in terms of dress, speech, and customs. In 1680, the Fifth Dalai Lama proclaimed Monyul as part of the Tibetan state, and work on the Tawang Monastery in Tawang began in the same year. Soon after, the Tibetan government started deputing representatives to the Tawang Monastery in order to collect taxes from Monpa villages.[6] For nearly three centuries after that, the Monpas used the trade routes to keep up connections of religion, pilgrimage, kinship, and commerce with Tibet as well as Bhutan. In 1914, at the Simla Convention, the British colonial government signed a treaty with the Tibetan representative to delineate the McMahon Line boundary between India and Tibet, but the Chinese representative refused to ratify it. Monyul was made part of a political division called the North East Frontier Tracts, but as the British made no effort to enforce the boundary on the ground, Tibetan tax collection continued as before and cross-border exchanges between Tibet and Monyul carried on.

After Indian Independence, the North East Frontier Tracts were reconstituted as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1951, which was constitutionally included within the province of Assam. But movement across the Indo-Tibetan border carried on until 1962, when border tensions between India and China blew up into a full-fledged war. Between October and December 1962, Chinese troops temporarily occupied many areas of Monyul before withdrawing. In 1972, NEFA became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh, separate from Assam, and in 1987 it acquired full statehood.

In the wake of the war, the post-colonial Indian state tightened military controls and security measures at the Monyul-Tibet border, effectively disrupting cross-border relations. In the decades after the war, the Monpas neither regained access to former channels of trade, nor were they properly connected to the communication and transportation networks of post-colonial India. Nevertheless, the border war did not produce, but in fact exacerbated, the conditions already set in place by colonial buffer practices. I trace back Monyul's remoteness not simply to the moment of war, but further back to the colonial period that preceded it.

Buffers and borders

By its very definition, a buffer is a liminal space which does not belong fully to any state but acts as a protective barrier between spaces

[6] Aris, 'The Monyul Corridor', p. 15.

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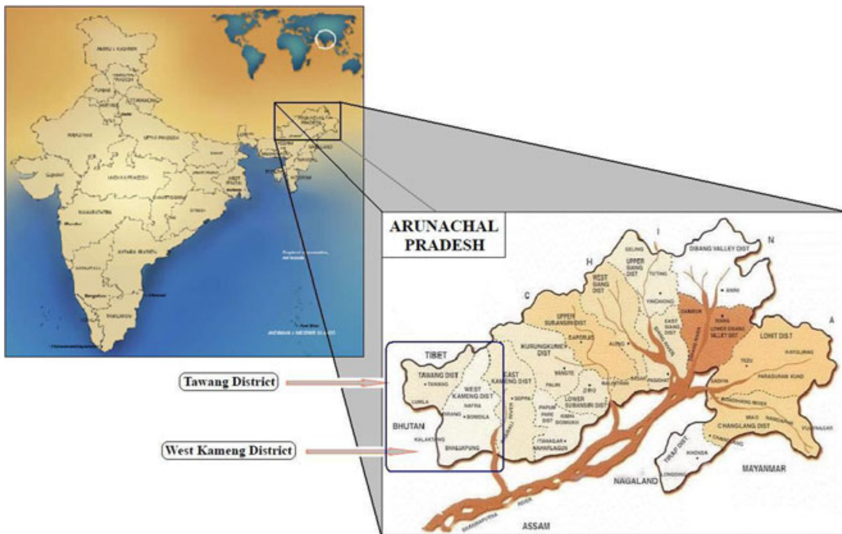

Figure 1. Map of Arunachal Pradesh in relation to India. *Source:* The author.

belonging to two states. Its main function is to be a neutral zone that is relatively dispensable compared to conventional state spaces. The notion of a buffer is commonly traced to the Indian viceroy Lord Curzon. According to him, the idea of a modern buffer as a deliberately neutral territory or state stemmed from 'the ancient and medieval conception of a neutral strip or belt of severance' whose object was 'to keep apart two Powers whose contact, otherwise, might provoke collision'.[7] Where earlier human communities had tried to create such neutral zones through conceiving of entire territories (such as deserts) as geographically impenetrable, modern states do the same thing through diplomacy and law. In this sense, a buffer is outside any formal state space.

While for Curzon, the 'diplomatic fiction' of a buffer could only be a temporary and expedient measure, and not sustainable, as it was bound to be absorbed by an advancing power sooner or later, he made the point that buffers cannot be chronologically typecast as a premodern entity. In other words, the buffer is a spatial practice that we find not only in ancient practices or colonial discourses but also in twenty-first century nation-state practices when the border is considered to be under threat. This is especially true of territories which are disputed

[7] Curzon, *Frontiers*, p. 28.

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between two nations. In contemporary times, we think of militarized borderlands and conflict zones under shadow governments as de facto buffer zones since they prohibit easy movement and regular settlement of people.

However, as Curzon himself wrote, what makes modern buffers different from the ancient and medieval conception of a neutral strip or belt of severance is that, whereas earlier communities treated the buffer as a malleable frontier that could be kept unoccupied (but only so that it could be later occupied), modern buffers are sanctioned by diplomatic conventions and international law. In other words, *modern buffers are sanctioned, paradoxically, by boundaries*. This means that the buffer does not preclude boundary lines from being drawn, but it can continue to exist after the boundary has been drawn. The boundary may function as a second wall of protection, as it may leave some *provisional* spaces to be used as a buffer. Indeed, in 1895, British representatives who sought to create a buffer between British India and Russian expansion in Central Asia drew the famous Durand Line on a map, thereby separating the North West Frontier of British India (now in Pakistan) from Afghanistan.[8]

I argue that Monyul was a buffer even after it was included in a delimited boundary. An extract of the proceedings of the Foreign Department in 1911 summarizes British calculations about the role to be played by the North East Frontier:

> By our Tibetan policy we do not endeavour to prevent China from establishing herself strongly in Tibet. It is the natural corollary of the policy that we should maintain inviolate the narrow zone of country [the North East Frontier] that still intervenes between India and China. Two things are essential as regards this zone. The first is to keep China out of it. The second is to keep British and Indian vested interests out of it as far as possible, and to avoid responsibilities in its internal administration. The reason of the first has already been explained. The reason for the second is that by allowing British and Indian vested interests to grow up in the zone, at any rate with anything that could be construed into a Government guarantee for the security of those interests, we destroy our *buffer* States and create those very difficulties, which we should endeavour to remove. (Emphasis mine.)[9]

Tawang, in particular, was considered 'a dangerous wedge of territory thrust in between the Miri country and Bhutan',[10] which needed to be

[8] Wynne, *Our Women are Free*, p. 20.
[9] 'Policy to be adopted toward the Tribes', 1911, p. 37.
[10] Chief of General Staff quoted in Reid, 'Balipara Frontier Tract', p. 281.

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co-opted into the British empire for reasons of defence. Thus, beginning with the delimitation of the McMahon Line in 1914, the British government in India deliberately followed a buffer policy towards Monyul by separating it from its previous social, political, and economic networks, and keeping it outside administrative networks.

Historian Thongchai Winichakul distinguishes the modern Western conception of a boundary from the traditional Siamese or Thai conception. While the modern boundary is a line in-between two sides of a border zone, in traditional polities, the border referred more to the limits of state authority, rather than territory, so that it appeared that a wide border lay between both sides' boundaries of authority. In the latter, the border was akin to a no-man's land. Winichakul maintains that in Thailand, the modern nation form or 'geo-body' emerged with the aid of modern geography.[11] Although Winichakul was discussing changing notions of the boundary in Thailand, he implies that modern national boundaries invariably refer to inflexible lines.

Winichakul overlooks the fact that some modern boundaries also include the buffer zone, which means neutral, even dispensable, frontiers. Buffers contradict the modern notion of a boundary as something that outlines and strictly differentiates one national body from another. That is, despite the technical definition of modern boundaries, there may actually be reserve spaces at the border that function as a protective cast that can, upon necessity, be shed. In fact, when parts of Arunachal Pradesh, then comprising the North East Frontier Agency of Assam, fell to the advancing Chinese army in the 1962 India-China war, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said in a radio broadcast 'My heart goes out to the people of Assam.' Many interpreted this statement to mean that these areas had been surrendered to the Chinese.[12] Of course, this cannot be taken as definitive evidence that Monyul was perceived as a buffer. What it does prove, however, is that modern boundaries are dynamic lines, which may be realigned in the event of a political crisis, and buffers make provision for such emergency situations.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when treaties were always in danger of being undermined by the expansionist intentions of a rival power, a boundary did not mean that the external contours of a modern nation could be fixed, once and forever, as a 'geo-body'. Imperial buffer zone practices required the deliberate maintenance of

[11] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, p. 77.
[12] Bareh, *Encyclopaedia of North East India*, p. 232.

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particular territories along the frontiers of empire, in which administration ranged from negligible to limited governance, with the strategic aim of keeping a neutral territorial stretch between one's own gates, so to speak, and those of the enemy's. Less investment of administrative resources in the buffer meant that in the event of an enemy attack on the frontiers, the colonial power would be forewarned before it incurred serious financial losses, while also gaining time to recoup forces as the enemy crossed the threshold.

Sir Henry McMahon, the British diplomat who gave his name to the McMahon Line boundary between India and Tibet, made a distinction between 'boundary' and 'frontier' in his inaugural address to the Royal Society of Arts in 1935. He argued that 'a frontier sometimes refer[s] to a wide tract of border country, or to hinterlands or buffer states, undefined by any external boundary line'.[13] Note that in this statement, McMahon used 'frontier' interchangeably with 'hinterlands' or 'buffer states'. He held that a frontier or buffer meant a tract of neutral territory separating two potentially antagonistic neighbours, but that a boundary was a specific line, either *delimited* by precise map descriptions or *demarcated* by ground surveys.

For McMahon, the distinction between delimitation and demarcation was one of stages. According to him, delimitation was the determination of a boundary line by means of a treaty, expressed in written and verbal terms, while demarcation was the actual definition of the line by physical means such as pillars. In the heyday of imperial rivalry and world wars, McMahon could argue that 'it was the frontier buffer zone which had the greatest importance, and the boundary was comparatively less significant, particularly when it ran through inhospitable mountain or desert terrain. Hence, the delay in establishing administration and control over the border region.'[14] In McMahon's conceptualization, we may infer, the buffer zone exists in the nebulous time-space between delimitation and demarcation, for once the boundary is demarcated through the physical presence of agents of the state deployed in surveillance, the buffer ceases to exist, at least in principle, as it is fully incorporated in the state spaces. We may further assume, following McMahon's distinction between delimitation and demarcation, that a delimited boundary that has not been demarcated is conducive to buffer zones.

[13] McMahon, 'International Boundaries', pp. 3–4.
[14] Foreign Political (Secret) Proceedings (India), May 1915, Nos. 36–50.

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In this kind of imperialist discourse, it thus appears that the creation of the buffer and the expansion of the frontier were associated practices, for both rested on the assumption of a flexible or variable boundary line. The expansion of the frontier is possible only if the boundary in question could be pushed further forward as the imperialist power advances territorially. Similarly, the buffer zone presumed the existence of two boundaries—inner and an outer—where the inner protects the core, while the outer merely signifies a limit that can be modified in the event of hostile forces overrunning it. Once the buffer zone has been incorporated into one of the other state spaces, its neutral-zone quality is over.

As we will see in later sections, in relation to the northeast frontier areas, the policy of the British government in India followed Sir Henry McMahon in equating the frontier with a buffer. So even after the Indo-Tibetan boundary was fixed by the 1914 treaty, there was very little effort to consolidate it politically, leading to the continuation of its frontier aspects and, thereby, of the buffer zone.

While it is true that the hilly, forested topography of Monyul did not easily favour British designs of rule, which were predicated on economy and thrift, geography alone cannot be the basis for characterizing an area as *terra nullius* or land belonging to no one. The rough terrain of sub-montane regions has never prevented movement, contact, or participation in political or commercial networks for the people who traditionally inhabited the hills.[15] Hills and rugged terrain could become the *pretext* for both not extending state control and extending government surveillance over unfriendly territories,[16] but topography itself has never been a barrier to serious expansionist intentions, especially if we recall Frederick Turner's arguments regarding the expansion of the American frontier into the 'Wild West'.

In nineteenth-century colonial Assam, a similar kind of essentialist construction was at work in the categorization of land in the Assam foothills as 'wasteland' by the Waste Land Settlement Rules of 1838.[17] On the one hand, such a categorization assumed that only land under

[15] Giersch, *Asian Borderlands*; Jonsson, *Mien Relations*.

[16] Scott, *The Art of not being Governed*, p. 54, argues that, historically, state-building has been constrained by geography: 'abrupt changes in altitude, ruggedness of terrain, and the political obstacle of population dispersion and mixed cultivation' constituted a 'friction of terrain', limiting the state's political reach over such areas. Gordillo, 'Opaque Zones of Frontier'.

[17] Turner, *The Frontier*; Sharma, *Empire's Garden*; Majumdar, 'The Colonial State and Resource Frontiers'.

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sedentary cultivation was 'useful', while, on the other, it allowed uncultivated land to be leased to tea-planters at throwaway, revenue-free prices. Just as wasteland is an ideological construct that operated to justify the appropriation of resources, the construct of hills as unamenable to governance also stems from a politics of access that may not overlap with empirical realities of use and habitation.

I argue that instead of geography and topography inhibiting administration, the buffer design underscores a politics of access and *constructs* particular geographies as secluded or 'untouchable', in an administrative sense. In marking a territory as such, colonial buffer practices achieved a double agenda—they erased past networks in which these lands were formerly embedded and constructed them as amenable to colonialist intervention.

Zones of difference and indifference

…if one begins with the premise that spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference through connection…instead of assuming the autonomy of the primeval community, we need to examine how it was formed *as a community* out of the interconnected space that always already existed.[18]

The North East Frontier Tracts, the colonial name for the territory now known as Arunachal Pradesh, was a political division of British India corresponding to the hilly areas on the northeast frontier of Assam. In 1913 this frontier region was initially divided into the Central and Western Section of the North East Frontier. In 1919, the Central and Eastern Sections were renamed the Sadiya Frontier Tract and Balipara Frontier Tract respectively, and in 1942, the Tirap Frontier Tract was carved out of Sadiya.[19] The North East Frontier Tracts were listed as the Excluded Areas of the province of Assam under the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935.

In British India, Excluded Areas were tribal and indigenous lands that were made exempt from regular laws of governance. They were protected enclaves, placed outside constitutional law so that the customary laws, traditions, and land rights of the indigenous people could function

[18] Gupta and Ferguson, *Culture, Power, Place*, p. 36.
[19] Elwin, *A Philosophy for NEFA*, p. 3.

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autonomously.[20] Initially termed 'Backward Tracts' in the Government of India Act of 1919, these areas were renamed 'Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' in the Government of India Act of 1935 and were directly administered by the governor of the province.[21] The Excluded Areas of colonial Assam included the Naga Hills (now Nagaland), Lushai Hills (Mizoram), North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao district in Assam), and the North East Frontier Tracts. Partially Excluded Areas were the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills (Meghalaya) and the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong district in Assam).[22]

Anthropologist Kaushik Ghosh proposes the term 'exclusive governmentality' to understand colonial ruling logic in non-frontier Excluded Areas. He observes that the colonial state first constructed the tribal or indigenous populations of India as irreducibly different from the mainstream Hindu/Aryan populations. It then devised two ways of dealing with their alterity: 'incorporative governmentality' or the assimilation of these populations through rule and the market, and 'exclusive governmentality' or the protection of tribal areas from Hindu/Aryan exploitation through the creation of autonomous areas under the governorship of a state commissioner.[23] The latter mode of governance rested on the belief of a basic incompatibility between tribal customary laws and market principles, and overlooked the fact that this incompatibility was a function of the displacement and exploitation of tribals through new modes of colonial land tenure.

However, my focus in this article is on colonial governance in the Excluded Areas that lay on the frontiers of empire, instead of those located in 'included' or administered areas in the mainland. Unlike the Excluded Areas elsewhere, which were small, scattered pockets in mainland territories, on the northeastern frontier these formed an almost continuous stretch from the west, near Bhutan, to the east, bordering

[20] Sanjib Baruah reminds us that the idea of protection came only after the British colonizers realized the adverse consequences of their earlier policies in terms of intervening in the affairs of indigenous peoples: see Baruah, 'Citizens and Denizens', p. 49.

[21] Ibid.; Reid, 'The Excluded Areas of Assam'.

[22] The Naga Hills Tract, corresponding to the state of Nagaland today, did not function as much as a buffer as did the North East Frontier Tracts. A colonial officer, J. H. Hutton, had noted that despite loose administration in the Naga Hills, external contact through the missionaries, especially the American Baptist Church, as well as military communication necessitated by the Second World War, had brought the Nagas into close contact with the outside world; see Hutton, 'Problems of Reconstruction'.

[23] Ghosh, 'Between Global Flows and Local Dams', p. 508.

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Myanmar.[24] In non-frontier Excluded Areas, incorporative and exclusive governmentality, despite being contrasting modes of rule, went hand in hand; these areas were both protected and simultaneously included in a colonial modernity, manifested through education, development, and land tenure laws. This was not so in frontier Excluded Areas. The official British attitude towards the tribes in the frontier areas was one of conciliation rather than overt control.

Colonial rule was well entrenched in most parts of India by the mid-eighteenth century, but rule in the northeastern frontier was initiated only in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, beyond acts of annexation, from the beginning, colonial rulers did not show much interest in extending rule in the northeastern borders and were happy to leave these areas in their earlier state of governance as long as they did not hamper the functioning of the British administration in the nearby plains areas. The frontier areas in northeast India were excluded from the privileges of representative government in accordance with the 'policy of non-interference', which, although not representative of a unanimous decision among various sections of the administration, was, nonetheless, the official stance of the British government.[25] Secondly, and this is related to the first point, the exclusion of these frontier tracts on the northeastern frontier of British India served important geopolitical purposes, resting on calculations of military defence and security.

The difference between the two kinds of excluded areas in mainland and frontier territories continues in post-colonial India, where the formerly Excluded Areas on the frontier are now Scheduled Areas defined under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, a stronger legislation for preserving local autonomy than the Fifth Schedule, under which the formerly Excluded Areas on the mainland are included.[26]

Monyul was part of the Balipara Frontier Tract in the North East Frontier Tracts. British political deliberations with regard to Monyul were more complex than those concerning other frontier tracts, for it was subject to the sovereignty of a Tibetan state ruled by the Dalai Lamas.[27] Unlike the other Excluded Areas in the northeastern frontier, where the people did not owe sovereign allegiance to any external

[24] Reid, 'The Excluded Areas of Assam', p. 18.
[25] Choudhury, *The North-East Frontier of India*.
[26] Chandra, 'Adivasis in Contemporary India', p. 298.
[27] Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*.

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power, Monyul had a strong Tibetan political and cultural presence. (I will return to this point later.) So while the British adopted policies to simultaneously appease ('pacify') and loosely administer the native populations in other frontier areas, in Monyul they additionally had to push back the older administrative structures and construct the region as different not only from the adjoining plains below but also from the neighbouring Tibetan areas above.

I propose the term 'zones of difference and indifference' in order to draw out the double-layered nature of exclusive governmentality on which rule in the Monyul region was predicated. I also wish to highlight, through the use of the term 'zone' (from the Latin *zona*, meaning geographical belt), the territorialist considerations that underlay modes of rule in frontier areas. Maintaining Monyul as a buffer required the simultaneous separation of this region and its inhabitants from the people of both Tibet in the North and Assam in the South (hence, 'zones of difference'), while, at the same time, exercising only a loose administration over these regions for reasons of economy and political strategy (hence, 'zones of indifference'). This double exclusion meant severing long-term, cross-border relations in which the Monpas had been embedded for centuries, and transforming the latter into a neutral zone. In the following sections, I will elaborate the two-way process through which this transformation was effected.

With respect to Monyul's southward ties

South of Monyul lie the plains of Assam, a territory which for six centuries was in the hands of the powerful Ahoms, an offshoot of the Shans, who first entered the southeastern corner of Assam from Burma in the thirteenth century (1228 AD). At that time, Assam was divided between a number of tribal chiefdoms. The Ahoms had to deal with two kinds of tribes in Assam—the plains and the hills tribes. The plains tribes, such as the Morans, Chutiyas, Kacharis, and Koches, were all under the influence of Hinduism to some extent, although they retained their tribal customs and institutions, and the Ahoms subjugated them by force. Towards the various hills tribes, with whom they came into gradual contact through their territorial conquests, the Ahoms had to adopt different measures to exert and maintain their control.[28] They

[28] Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations*.

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encountered the tribes of the North East Frontier Tracts, such as the Aka (precolonial name for the Hrusso), Abor (Adi), Dafla (Nishi), and Bhutia (the generic name for all Tibetan-related groups of the Himalayas, including the Monpas and Shedukpens of Tawang and West Kameng), at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Most of these hills tribes lacked labour and certain necessary food supplies for which they came down to the plains from time to time. The Ahoms tried different methods of conciliation with respect to these hills communities, and the *posa* system introduced by King Pratap Singha (1603–1641) was particularly significant. It was a triangular relationship that existed between the Ahom state, the *ryots* or tenant cultivators living in the foothills of Assam, and the tribal chiefs. The word *posa* means a collection or subscription for a common purpose,[29] and in this specific context, it meant the subscription raised by a village to meet the demands of their visitors from the highlands. The *posa* reflected the feudal nature of the Ahom state, as its recipients had to recognize the sovereignty of the Ahom king, show allegiance, pay tribute, and render services to the latter; in return they collected *posa* in the form of various gifts of cloth, grains, utensils, and a share of the fish caught from ponds or forest produce from the foothill *ryots*, who also sometimes provided services to the tribal chiefs. For this reason, these *ryots* got partial remission from taxes to be paid to the Ahom state. *Posa* was a very well-defined system, whereby the hills and plains communities were involved in mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence.

King Pratap Singha had granted the right of *posa* to sections of the Aka, Dafla, Abor as well as to the 'Bhutias of Charduar',[30] or the Sherdukpens of current West Kameng, who are culturally similar to the Monpas but independent of Tibet. The Monpas in a few villages, such as Thembang and Namshu in central Monyul, also seem to have been involved in this customary exchange system in which they obtained taxes in kind from the plainspeople living on the foothills.[31]

Further, trade ensured a continuous interchange between the hills in the North and the plains in the South. Articles for trade moved through several *duars* or mountain passes from West to East, from the Indian plains to Bhutan (11 on the frontier of Bengal and adjacent Koch Behar and seven on that of Assam). A considerable amount of trade was

[29] See ibid., p. 158; Jha, 'Politics of Posa', p. 446.
[30] Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India*, p. 18.
[31] Field interviews, 2010. See also Jha, 'Politics of Posa', p. 450.

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carried out in the markets and fairs held along the foothills of the *duars*. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bhutanese state had control over these *duars*.[32] Towards the East lay the Kuriapara *duar* on the Assam-Bhutan border, which was more or less under the sovereignty of Tibet and the main channel for Assam trade with Bhutan, Tibet, and China. Local Monpa chiefs or Sat Rajas (Seven Chiefs), answerable to the representatives of Tawang Monastery, oversaw the collection of revenue from trade that passed through this *duar*.

Alexander Mackenzie's report on the border trade with Tibet is one of the most frequently quoted on this topic:

> Tibetan caravans conducted by 20 persons used to come down annually to a mart of Chouna on the Assam border after two month's journey from Lassa and conveyed silver bullion to the amount of about one lakh of rupees…The large quantities of rice brought by the [Assam] merchants at the latter place were purchased and imported into Tibet from Assam by the Tibetan merchants. Tussa [tussar] silk cloth, iron and lac found in Assam, skins, buffalo horns, pearls and corals, first imported from Bengal were traded by the Assamese merchants. The Tibetan merchants brought woolens, gold dust, salt, musk, horses, Chinese silk etc. The annual fair was temporarily stopped due to Burmese occupation…The fair was started at Udalguri later on.[33]

Monpa traders, who acted as middlemen in this trans-Himalayan trade, not only attended trade fairs in Tibet but also trade marts on the Assam-Monyul border in which traders from Bhutan and Tibet also participated. Tibetans imported *eri* silk, boots, enamel ware, kerosene, oil, wool, thread, cotton piece goods, knives, tobacco, etc. from Assam and exported there large quantities of blankets, sheep, musk, ponies, skins, chillies, oranges, and walnuts. During my fieldwork interviews (conducted in 2009–2013), informants told me that some Monpa communities even developed hosting relations (*netsang*) in the form of fictive family ties with the plains-dwelling communities (Kachari/Bodo) of neighbouring Assam.

Thus, until the British moved into Assam, the hills and plains communities were linked together by various customary ties, relations forged in the course of trade, and mutual cooperation and interdependence. On 24 February 1826, the British came into possession of Assam through the Yandaboo Treaty and started administering it as a British province. When the British government took over the administration of the northeast frontier areas, they

[32] Misra, *Becoming a Borderland*, p. 67.
[33] Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India*, p. 15.

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introduced policies that significantly changed existing relations between hills and plains communities.

The British were initially interested in opening overland trade routes to Tibet and China via the northeast frontier, and so they captured the *duars* controlled by the Bhutanese government in order to gain access to the voluminous trade that passed through the foothills passes. The British also signed a treaty with the Monpa chiefs to purchase rights over the Kuriapara *duar* in 1844 in lieu of the chiefs making an annual cash payment of Rs 5,000.[34] As a result of such treaties and policies, the Monpas no longer had to interact with the Assamese directly.

After securing the rights to the *duars*, the British instituted annual trade fairs in the foothills where people from Assam and the professional trading communities of India, such as the Marwaris, could exchange items with hills tribes as well as Tibetans and Bhutanese. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in light of Russian overtures to, and Chinese claims on, Tibet, the British gradually dropped their plans of developing trade routes to Tibet. With the flow of cheaper goods brought by commercial traders from the plains into the trade marts in the foothills, demand for Tibetan goods declined and, correspondingly, the former trade routes as well as the trade marts in the foothills also declined in importance.[35] As the demand for Tibetan goods dwindled, the role of the former intermediaries (for example, the Monpas) of the trans-Himalayan trade also diminished. The latter continued to carry on trade with Tibet but their importance as trade agents was reduced.

Secondly, once the British conquered Assam, they reinterpreted the *posa* as a kind of extortion tax, construing it as a concession made by a weakened Ahom monarchy to bands of hills tribes, rather than a system that derived from established proprietary feudal rights over land. Although the *posa* was not some ill-defined exaction but a well-ascertained feudal privilege granted to the bordering hills chiefs of Arunachal Pradesh by the Ahom sovereigns, the British redefined it as 'blackmail money' and made it directly payable in cash from the government treasury to the hills people. Kar explains,

[34] When the British annexed the *duars*, including the Kuriapara *duar*, they paid compensation for all of them. Later, on account of continued Bhutanese aggression, they stopped paying compensation to the latter, but the Assam government continued the payment of Rs 5,000 to Tawang, which shows that Tawang was not seen as connected with Bhutan. See 'Tour Diary of Mr. Imdad Ali'; 'Express Letter from Political Sikkim, Lhasa to Foreign New Delhi'.

[35] Ganguly, 'The Modus Operandi of Trade', p. 17.

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The self-image of the British Indian government as the rightful inheritor of an Ahom state was foundational to its territorial claims on the northeastern frontier. Within the grids of indivisible territorial sovereignty, all other revenue claims were compulsively translated as acts of unsanctioned encroachment and violence—as 'blackmails'.[36]

Between 1840 and 1850, British officers toured the North East Frontier areas, convincing different *posa*-receiving frontier communities to receive their *posa* directly from the government and not involve the *ryots* in the plains and foothills. By the 1860s, *posa* had become the generic name for an annual payment made to certain highland communities so that the latter would desist from attacking plains villages. The abolition of the old system of *posa* terminated the customary relations that had existed between the hills people and their bordering Assamese neighbours, since it now existed as a direct relation between the state and the hills chiefs.

In 1873, the British introduced a measure which initiated a more drastic transformation of the relations between the hills, including Monyul, and the plains. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 empowered the colonial government to prescribe and, from time to time, alter by notification the so-called inner line along the foothills, corresponding roughly to the boundary between the hilly tribal tracts and the plains. The inner line prohibited all British subjects or any person residing in or passing through such districts from moving to the hills from the plains without a pass under the hand and seal of the executive officer.[37] The British took responsibility for law and order only up to the inner line; beyond it, the hills tribes were left to themselves. Hence, the inner line not only marked the boundaries between hills and plains, but also the frontiers of administration proper.

Although this regulation was ostensibly to protect tribal interests, its actual aim was to protect the empire's interests in the Assam plains. By the beginning of the 1870s, Assam, with its flourishing industries of tea, petroleum, coal, rubber, wood, and the ivory trade, was a promising resource for British revenue, whereas the hills bordering Assam, inhabited by tribes, represented, from a colonial administrator's point of view, an unreliable condition of law and order. Hill tribes often came into conflict with entrepreneurs or speculators who ventured into their areas for commerce. Furthermore, when these tribes came down to the plains, they sometimes came into conflict with plainsmen over supplies.

[36] Kar, 'Nomadic Capital and Speculative Tribes', pp. 47–49.
[37] Baruah, 'Clash of Resource Use Regimes', p. 120.

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Therefore, the British wished to institute a law that would reduce contact, and therefore friction, between hills and plains dwellers.

The inner line, in practice, did not necessarily entail a clean division between the hills and the plains, for timber merchants continued to push beyond the inner line in search of timber and hills people continued visiting neighbouring plains settlements for supplies. According to Kar, the inner line was based on 'resource-sensitive flexibility', for it changed as new resources were discovered; until the second decade of the twentieth century, the line was constantly redrawn to accommodate new tea or coal tracts or valuable forest areas.[38] Majumdar traces the inner line regulation directly to the rubber speculators, who infringed boundaries of actual control to tap into the rubber resources of the North East Frontier areas, and shows how the 'inner line traced its way from Lower Assam to the regions holding concentrated numbers of rubber trees in Upper Assam, such as Darrang and Lakhimpur districts'.[39] The hills beyond constituted a flexible 'resource frontier' that could be extracted for resources. The inner line also shifted due to the strong fear of the British that the communities beyond the line would not recognize the rights of the British government and would consider themselves independent; this led to the sporadic expansion of the line from time to time.[40]

What I want to highlight here, however, is the logic of separation inherent in the inner line policy and how it contributed to the severance of age-old, customary, and systematic interactions between hills and plains populations. The inner line might have been a shifting line, but it enforced the right of the British state to regulate movement between the inner and outer limits of its jurisdiction. It not only asserted the state's monopoly of control over movement in the areas it governed, but also the state's control over the interactions and communications between private planters, traders, and entrepreneurs, and the non-rent paying hills populations as well as between hills and plains populations. The inner line regulation further created an ideological divide between the hills—unruly, nomadic, primitive—and the plains—sedentary and modern.

The various measures adopted by the British and described above disrupted the free circular trade between Tibet, Assam, Bhutan, and

[38] Ibid., p. 55.
[39] Majumdar, 'The Colonial State and Resource Frontiers', p. 32.
[40] Kar, 'When was the Postcolonial?', p. 50.

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the hills people of the North East Frontier Tracts; put a stop to unrestrained movement between the hills and the plains; and changed the nature of hills-plains interactions. They constituted the first step in the spatial transformation of the frontier tracts.

With respect to Monyul's northward ties

A second step had to be taken before Monyul could be considered a buffer. This consisted of severing the northward ties of the Monpas, that is, their links with the Tibetan state, since a buffer's sovereign ties cannot overlap. Monyul became part of Tibet in the seventeenth century when, in an 1680 edict, the Fifth Dalai Lama proclaimed that Tawang and its neighbouring areas would henceforth be under Tibetan rule.[41] In the same year, work on the Tawang Monastery or Gaden Namgyal Lhatse was started by Lodre Gyatso, or Mera Lama as he is widely known, a contemporary of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

The Tawang Monastery was built for religious propagation but also had a military purpose. Located on the southwestern periphery of the Tibetan polity, it served as a vanguard military outpost for Tibetan forces during the seventeenth-century Drukpa (Bhutanese)-Tibetan sectarian rivalries, which is attested to by its fortified architecture.[42] Once this monastery was built, monastic influence over local Monpa affairs became stronger. The abbot of Tawang Monastery was both the temporal and spiritual head of the people, and the whole of the area under the jurisdiction of the Tawang Monastery was divided into *dzongs* (fort/district) that were in charge of tax collection. After the threat of Bhutan subsided, Tawang continued to function as an extension of the Tibetan system.

Monyul was integrated into Tibet's networks through both rule and religion, and hence was subject to monastic systems of tribute centred at Lhasa. The Monyul region was divided into three major tax outposts—Tawang Dzong in the North, Dirang Dzong in central Monyul, and Talung Dzong in southwest Monyul; grains collected as taxes would be stored in these posts and were carried by conscripted labour (*u-la*) from local villages in relay form until they finally reached Tsona in Tibet, from where a portion travelled to the Tibetan government's treasury. Most of the villages in the Tawang valley fell under the authority of the

[41] Aris, 'Notes on the History of the Monyul Corridor'.
[42] Sarkar, *Tawang Monastery*.

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dzongpon (officer) of Tsona Dzong, while those in the South in Dirang and Kalaktang, up to the Assam foothills, were under the jurisdiction of the Tawang Monastery.

Captain F. M. Bailey, the British officer who, along with Captain H. Morsehead, mapped the boundary between Tibet and India in 1913, offered the following description:

Mönyul is the comparatively low-lying district of Tibet which is governed by the lamas of Tawang…The district is governed by a council of six named *Trukdri*. They are the *Kenpo*, or Abbot of Tawang Gompa, another lama in a high position, two monks known as *Nyetsangs*…and two Tsöna [district in Tibet] Dzongpöns. In this way, the Tsöna Dzongpöns have a hand in the Government of Mönyul. In the summer when the Dzongpöns are at Tsöna they keep agents at Tawang to act for them but from November to April they themselves live at Tawang and send their agents to live in the cold climate of Tsöna. Under the Trukdri are the two Dzongs, Dirang and Taklung, each of which is held by two monks sent from Tawang who act together. The Dzongpöns of Taklung live at Amratala on the Assam border in grass huts during the trading season.[43]

The Tibetan state asserted its rule not simply through the regular collection of taxes but also through its military presence. Although the Tibetans' main interest in Monyul was to collect taxes, they also maintained a standing army in Dirang consisting of a 'regular armed force of lamas' to enable them to fend off raids by neighbouring groups as well as from Bhutanese attacks.[44] The Tibetan authorities further regulated entry to areas they considered to be within their jurisdiction, and colonial officers on exploratory missions found that they had to show their passports before they could pass through. Captain G. A. Nevill, a British police superintendent and later political officer of the Balipara Frontier Tract, who visited Tawang in March 1914, called Tawang Monastery an 'off-shoot of the Drepung monastery' and noted that 'the inhabitants of Tawang are largely composed of Tsona people, who come here to escape the severe cold of Tsona during the winter months'.[45] Early British colonial writings acknowledged Monyul to be attached to Tibet, terming it a 'vassal state' of Tibet.[46] British officers and agents who visited Tawang described at length how Tsona in Tibet

[43] Bailey, *Reports on an Exploration*, pp. 41–42.

[44] Trotter, 'Account of the Pundit's Journey', p. 120.

[45] See Nevill cited in Reid, 'Balipara Frontier Tract', p. 287; Bailey, *Reports on an Exploration*.

[46] Kingdon-Ward, 'The Assam Himalaya', p. 613.

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was an important administrative centre for Monyul. For example, Pundit Nain Singh, the first Indian surveyor trained by the British, visited Tawang on 24 December 1874 and observed that the Tawang Dzongpon ('Jongpon') had his summer residence at Tsona.

The Tibetan state did not exert its presence in Monyul alone. People in other parts of the North East Frontier Tracts also paid taxes to some Tibetan private families.[47] For example, the Memba, a Tibetan Buddhist highland population living in Menchuka administrative sub-division of West Siang district in Arunachal Pradesh, paid taxes to the Lhasa-based Tibetan aristocratic Lhalu family, who held the area as an estate.[48] Memba is actually a phonetic variant of 'Monpa', for the communities who are included in this category are presumed to have migrated from Tawang and Bhutan in the nineteenth century. The Memba had trade ties with both Tibetans and the Tibeto-Burman tribes of the North East Frontier Tracts and even acted as intermediaries between them until the closure of the border. Yet, it was only in Monyul that the Tibetan state established systematic control, mainly through the Tawang Monastery.

Compared to the other areas of Arunachal Pradesh, with which Tibetans merely had trade relations, or where Tibetan families held estates, Tibetan interests were far more entrenched, politically, in Monyul. The conversion of Monyul into a specifically British buffer required not simply the annexation of the frontiers but also the removal of non-British (that is, Tibetan) influences that could constitute rival state claims. Not only were the Monpas tied to the Tibetan state, but they were also connected to other Tibetan Buddhist communities and spaces through routes of trade, migration, and pilgrimage. Due to the deep-seated nature of Tibetan influence in this region, erasing the Tibetan presence from Monyul was a task quite unlike severing the latter's barter ties with the plains.

Apprehending the extent of Tibetan influence in Monyul, the British were convinced that in order to make a buffer out of Monyul they would first have to wrest control from the Tibetan administration. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the British government sanctioned various tours and expeditions to Monyul in order to find out the nature and extent of Tibetan influence there. Captain Nevill, the first political officer of Balipara Frontier Tract, wrote in his memorandum that in the event of British annexation of Monyul, the

[47] Huber, 'Rethinking the Linkage'.

[48] Grothmann 'Migration Narratives', p. 128; Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn*, p. 245.

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Tawang monks, backed by the authorities of Tawang monastery and its parent monastery at Drepung, 'would take up a policy of obstruction' which 'would be most difficult to overcome'.[49]

Building Monyul as a buffer meant that it had to be simultaneously separated from both prior and subsequent networks in which it was embedded and then brought under British policies of non-interference, which I read as practices of indifference. The colonial production of Monyul as a buffer could be achieved through a dual boundary division that disconnected Monyul from both its northbound and southbound connections.[50]

Tibetan recalcitrance and oppositional spaces of colonial Mon

However, the buffer project in Monyul was never completed and was subject to contestation, most notably from the Tibetan religious aristocracy, whose temporal hold over, and material interests in, Monyul were challenged by the latter's incorporation into colonial India. When Lonchen Shatra, the representative of the Tibetan government, sanctioned the 1914 boundary proposed by the British, not all Tibetan officers were happy about ceding Tawang to British India. Upon the Shatra's return to Lhasa, many in the Tibetan government thought that he 'had given away too much'.[51] Tibetans were reluctant to give up their considerable tax and property rights in Monyul.

Thus, despite the transfer of Monyul from Tibetan to British hands in 1914, Tibetan tax collection carried on in the region. While the idea of a buffer rests on the notion of an empty (unoccupied) stretch of territory between two (occupied) states, Monyul not only included a local mobile population of cross-border traders until the 1950s, it also continued to host Tibetans and Bhutanese from other territories visiting with the missions of trade or for taxation. During this period, Tibet did not

[49] Nevill cited in Reid, 'Balipara Frontier Tract', p. 288.

[50] Imperial politics at the Monyul frontier was only one instance of a general imperial strategy of divide and rule that led to bifurcations of continuous cultural zones in frontier areas. Olaf Caroe, one of the hardline administrators who served in northeast India, criticized Alastair Lamb's *India-China Border*, which attempts to attribute the boundary war to British policies, as follows: '…since when has ethnic or linguistic affinity been accepted as the criterion for national boundaries, for instance, in Switzerland or Afghanistan?'. See Caroe, 'The India-China Frontiers', p. 274.

[51] Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, p. 23.

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maintain an official presence in Monyul, but had an unofficial or de facto presence there.[52] It exercised its authority in Monyul not through a military apparatus but as a cultural paternalistic force through religion as well as taxation in the name of monastic tribute.

There were a number of reasons for the continuation of Tibetan activities in Monyul. First, certain ambiguities within the boundary treaty itself allowed sections of Tibetan society to continue collecting taxes. It was not just the Tibetan government that had a direct interest in Tawang, but also certain rich private Tibetan families, who maintained separate estates in Tawang and the adjoining areas, to whom people in some parts of Monyul paid taxes. In finalizing the boundary treaty, the British allowed certain monasteries and Tibetan families to maintain their 'private' interests in Monyul.[53] By doing so, the colonial rulers made a distinction between 'private' and 'public' which actually did not correspond to the realities of the Tibetan state. Such a distinction was hardly clear-cut as the Tibetan government allowed some rich Lhasa families to collect taxes, and they, in turn, had to contribute to the royal treasury. The Monpas of Mago-Thingbu, for example, paid taxes of yak butter and cheese to Kishung Depa, the agent of Samdru Photrang, one of the big families of Lhasa.[54]

The Tibetan state was a 'theocratic' one in which the interests of monastery and government coincided.[55] Captain G. S. Lightfoot, the British officer who led an expedition to Tawang in 1938, and even demarcated the boundary between Tawang and Bhutan, admitted as much, saying, 'So inextricably are State and Religion intermingled in Tibet that until the Tibetan monastic officials are withdrawn, Tibetan influence and intrigue must persist in the surrounding country.'[56] In

[52] Kingdon-Ward, 'Botanical and Geographical Exploration', p. 5.

[53] Bose, *British Policy*.

[54] Bailey, *Reports on an Exploration*, p. 40. According to one of my informants, Nima Damdul of Lhou village in Tawang, besides Mago-Thingbu, people of Luguthang, Chander, and Namshu villages, as well as a group of people from Thembang village in Dirang also paid taxes in the form of butter and chillies to the 'Kishung Dewa'. See also Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn*, p. 245.

[55] The argument that a private/public divide existed in the workings of the Tibetan state continues to be put forward even today by Indian researchers writing from a defence perspective. While such researchers admit that the Tawang Monastery was collecting dues on behalf of Drepung and that Tibetan private estates also existed until the 1950s, they argue that 'ecclesiastical jurisdiction' of the monastery should not be read as political rule by Tibet. See Dutta, 'Revisiting China's Territorial Claims', p. 563.

[56] Lightfoot cited in Reid, 'Balipara Frontier Tract', p. 298.

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fact, when the British paid Rs 5,000 as payment for taking over the Kuriapara Duar, the foothills pass controlled by Tawang, they did so on the assumption that it was to Tawang that the money would go, only realizing later that it was actually absorbed by Lhasa.

The boundary treaty did not take into account this blurring of private and public interests in Tibetan rule. Allowing certain Tibetan private interests to continue, while seeking to banish the workings of the Tibetan state in Monyul, was therefore a process riddled with internal contradictions. Even though the British were keen to separate Monyul from Tibetan political authority, they could not achieve a clean break: not only did Tibetan people continue to cross over but these inherent dualities in the boundary agreement also left scope for Tibet to maintain an unofficial 'public' presence in Monyul.

Besides the internal contradictions of the boundary treaty, the inconsistencies of opinion among the monastic aristocracy too contributed to a continuing Tibetan presence in Monyul, although these factors were interrelated. The ambiguities of the boundary treaty and in the attitude of Tibetan ruling classes to the Tawang question led to many among the Tibetan officer-ranks as well as their Monpa subjects failing to accept that political control had shifted to British hands. When the First World War began, the resulting confusion and financial crisis diverted the British government's attention away from the boundary issue until the mid-1930s.

In the late 1930s, certain administrators, like Olaf Caroe, actively pushed for the advancement of British forces right up to the boundary. This was partly in response to the continued Tibetan presence in the Balipara Frontier Tract which operated to the extent that when in 1935 naturalist Frank Kingdon-Ward wanted to enter the British territory of Tawang, he was arrested by the Tibetan authorities for not holding a Tibetan permit. Local political officers and representatives in Balipara Frontier Tract and the governor of Assam sent recommendations—for example, Captain G. S. Lightfoot, who was in charge of an expedition to Tawang in 1938, proposed that local representatives be appointed in Tawang, but he was ordered to withdraw due to 'financial stringency'.[57] His report recommended that one means of establishing British control was to impose a tax of Rs 5 per house and to appoint British agents, but the British government in India refused to extend its administration to Tawang.

[57] 'Kameng District brochure of 1975'.

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Political considerations led the British to adopt a cautious attitude towards squeezing out the Tibetan presence from Monyul. Indeed, in 1938, when the government sent an expedition to Tawang to 'inform the Monba that they were British subjects', the action was not viewed favourably by the Tibetans.[58] The British were unwilling to take on additional political, military, and financial commitments, nor were they prepared to antagonize the Tibetan government, out of the fear that 'The removal of the present officials [of the Tawang Monastery] who have been appointed by the Drepung Monastery would invite the active intervention [of] the largest monastery in the world.'[59]

British official thinking with regard to the policy to be adopted towards Tawang continued to oscillate between aggressive incorporation of the frontier and passive acquiescence of the status quo throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Many voices in the British administration, such as J. P Mills, adviser to the governor of Assam; Basil Gould, political officer, Sikkim; Robert Reid, governor of Assam; E. W. Fletcher, additional deputy secretary to the government of India; John Twynam, governor of Assam; R. Peel, secretary of state to the government of India, External Affairs department, and other officers were involved in such deliberations at different times throughout the 1930s and 1940s, representing different viewpoints. While Robert Reid advocated the permanent occupation of Tawang in a letter to Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, dated 3 January 1939, John Twynam thought that if the British gave up Tawang, the Tibetans might be willing to agree to a boundary running just south of it.[60]

Until the early 1940s, however, the British government did not arrive at any definite conclusion regarding the approach to Tawang, often appearing at a loss as to the best way to deal with repeated Tibetan 'encroachment' in the Tawang area. Official correspondence noted reports of a Tibetan officer coming to Tawang and attempting to collect taxes from villages as far south as Rupa, Kalaktang, and Shergaon. It was thought necessary to inform this Tibetan officer of the Indo-Tibetan treaty signed by Sir Henry McMahon and the Lonchen Shatra.[61] But in 1943, when the adviser to the governor of Assam J. P. Mills was given the task of enforcing the boundary defined in the

[58] Kingdon-Ward, 'The Assam Himalaya', p. 615.

[59] 'Report on the Tawang Expedition 1938'.

[60] 'Present Position with Regard to Tawang Area'.

[61] 'Cypher telegram dated 1st April, 1943, from Government of India, External Affairs Department to Secretary of State for India'.

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Simla Convention, he noted the lack of cooperation from the Tibetans: 'The Tibetans issued no maps and said, in effect, that they could not find the papers about the Convention. What they really meant was that if we had forgotten the boundary for over twenty-nine years we could go on forgetting about it altogether.'[62] Mills noted on his tour of the Balipara Frontier Tract in 1945 that the Tibetans were present not only near the Tibetan border, but as far down as Dirang, which was quite a distance from the boundary line.[63]

While the British were wary of exercising direct physical restraint against the Tibetans, they failed to make their point through diplomatic action as well, as the extract from the following correspondence reveals: 'Experience has shown that diplomatic action in Lhasa leads merely to exasperation … of bland protestation that their papers relevant to McMahon negotiations are missing' and the 'only effective action is to occupy either on permanent or semi-permanent basis such points as may be necessary to throw back present Tibetan encroachment and prevent repetition in future'.[64] However, subsequent correspondence between the External Affairs Department and the secretary of state for India shows that there was great reluctance to pursue an aggressive policy towards Tibetan encroachment in Tawang and the surrounding areas.

In yet another letter from the secretary of state for India to the External Affairs Department, the former attempted to make a case for formalizing the Indo-Tibetan border. Although he too sounded caution against offending the Tibetans by direct confrontation, he was of the view that if China were to absorb Tibet, the question of the Indo-Tibetan boundary would be a problem, because China would not consider the 1914 treaty as valid. His suggestion was not so much that the administration should be extended up to the McMahon Line, but instead that a 'definitive frontier' should be negotiated in a final boundary settlement with the Tibetans. The thinking appears to have been that the British should avoid extending control to areas north of the Sela pass to which the Tibetans attached special importance and 'which are not essential to a sound frontier from the military and political points of view'.[65]

[62] Mills, 'Problems of the Assam-Tibet Frontier', p. 154.

[63] Mills, 'Tours in the Balipara Frontier Tract', p. 9.

[64] 'Cypher telegram dated 11th March 1943, from Government of India, External Affairs Department to Secretary of State for India'.

[65] 'Cypher telegram dated 19th April 1943, from Government of India, External Affairs Department to Secretary of State for India'.

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Official correspondence from that period reveals that some proposals for establishing permanent military posts in Tawang floated around for a while. Discussions hinged around routes, and it was thought that the route via Rupa and Shergaon villages (in Kalaktang district in southwest Monyul) through Trashigang in Bhutan would afford a better approach to the occupation of Tawang. A plan to bring Tawang under the political officer of Sikkim instead of Assam was also mooted. But in a letter dated 13 July 1943, the governor of Assam A. G. Clow wrote, 'It was agreed that the Tawang area should be left alone for the present although Mr Caroe mentioned the possibility of re-establishing the posts which lie nearer the plains.'[66]

In 1945, the British representative in Tibet Hugh Richardson noted that the Tibetan parliament considered the British claim to Tawang as something new. Richardson therefore advocated adopting quiet, instead of aggressive, action to eliminate the Tibetan presence, so as not to arouse retaliations. A couple of years later, Richardson reported that, while a large number of lay and monastic individuals from Tawang would welcome regime change to British rule, the main opposition stemmed from high-ranking monastery officers and village headmen who would lose their powers of taxation. The Tawang officials were under orders from the Tibetan government to admit the British political authorities but not to give them land 'even enough to pitch a tent'.[67]

The British government kept the boundary agreement between themselves and the Tibetans secret for a long time, even from some of their administrators.[68] Since the Chinese representative had not ratified the 1914 boundary treaty, the British were reluctant to extend administrative activities to Monyul or even to publish maps of the boundary line.[69] Hence, the McMahon boundary was not published in the maps of that period. The official publication in 1938 of a map showing this boundary—which included destroying copies of an official document ('Aitchison's 'Treaties') in which the boundary was not depicted and replacing it with revised copies that showed the McMahon Line—was the first step towards securing its legitimacy.

The British were evidently loath to try and consolidate the border due to fears of being accused of imperialism.[70] They were concerned that

[66] 'Proceedings of the Office of the Advisor to the Governor of Assam'.
[67] Report by the British Trade Agent, 1947.
[68] Gupta, 'The McMahon Line', p. 524.
[69] Reid, 'Balipara Frontier Tract', p. 296.
[70] Letter from R. Peel to O. Caroe, 1943.

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pursuing more aggressive policies on the border would offend not only China but also the United States, who might be moved by Chinese propaganda to believe that the British were diverting their energies from the more pressing war and taking up to their old imperialistic ways of grabbing territories that did not belong to them. This shows that the British, despite having delimited a boundary line, were influenced by Sir Henry McMahon's 'frontier as buffer' concept with respect to the western parts of the North East Frontier Tracts right up until the eve of Indian independence. Despite sporadic attempts by certain British officers to 'occupy' Tawang, the latter remained untouched by a British military presence. In the Adi and Mishmi tracts in the central parts of this frontier region, the British government built a number of control posts, trading posts as well as road tracks to connect these areas to the rest of the country.

So if, on the one hand, there was a reluctance on the part of the British to consolidate the border, on the other, there was Tibetan recalcitrance towards recognizing this area as British. This led to the persistence of Monyul being identified as a Tibetan space. Many scholars have argued that one reason why the Tibetans continued to exercise a visible presence in Monyul up until the early 1950s was due to the lack of a 'forward policy' on the part of the British government, and that this, in turn, shaped the current border dispute between India and China.[71] Had the British established a solid state machinery in these areas, the post-colonial Indian state would have had a smoother route to staking its claims here.

However, as I show, gaining control over Monyul, especially Tawang, was a contested act between the British and Tibetan authorities. I argue that British policy in Monyul should not be read as a lack or a passive stance, but should be understood as an active strategy of imperial rule. Rule in this region was determined by serious calculations, and systematic procedures, which become obvious in the colonial discourse regarding Monyul. The British attempt to erase the Tibetans from Monyul and enforce its own presence there was also not a simple, direct affair but was shaped by strategic considerations (fear of retaliation), policy suggestions from different individuals, general guidelines of colonial rule (buffer logic), and also by forces operating beyond the spaces of Monyul (world wars and Chinese actions in

[71] Choudhury, *The North-East Frontier of India*; Gupta, 'The McMahon Line'; Lamb, *The McMahon Line*.

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Tibet). Hence, the British buffer design was never completed as oppositional spaces persisted.

The buffer as spatial fix

Margins … are sites from which we see the instability of social categories.[72]

I propose that the buffer concept was a 'spatial fix'[73]—a territorial solution to historically contingent processes—which stemmed from the social relations between Britain and its imperial rivals in Asia, Russia, and China in the early twentieth century. David Harvey argues in *The Limits to Capital* that capitalism adopts certain 'spatial fixes' or temporary geographical solutions in order to overcome its internal contradictions. According to Harvey, the history of capitalism has been marked by constant revolutions in transport, communications, and production technologies, for capitalism is driven by motives of profit and accumulation of surplus value. This, in turn, creates crises of overproduction such as the devaluation of both capital and labour (for example, unsold commodities, unemployed workers, social discontent) and therefore capitalism has to continually seek particular kinds of spatial fixes or geographical (landscape) configurations in order to temporarily overcome the crisis. Globalization, a stage in capitalist development, is, in this sense, a spatial fix whereby geographical expansion, outsourcing of capital, labour, industry, etc. become ways to resolve the capitalist crisis of overaccumulation.[74]

Following Harvey's concept, other political geographers have discussed how the current nation-state form was a 'temporary territorial resolution' in the development of capitalism during the time when nations were the centre of finance and business.[75] With changes in global capitalism (that is, globalization), the powers of the nation-state are resized as its operations are shifted either to cities, which become the new centres of business, financial planning, and administrative decision-making, or to transnational corporations and supra-state organizations such as the European Union.

[72] Tsing, 'From the Margins', p. 279.
[73] Harvey, *Limits to Capital*, p. 415. See also Smith, 'Contours of a Spatialised Politics'.
[74] Harvey, 'Globalization and the Spatial Fix', p. 28.
[75] For example, Brenner, 'Beyond State-centrism?'; Smith, 'Contours of a Spacialized Politics'.

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Unlike these spatial theorists, I do not use the notion of spatial fix in relation to Monyul's role in the trajectory of capitalism, but rather as referring to temporary territorial resolutions to historically contingent processes. This is not to suggest that the spatial transformations in and of Monyul were independent of capitalist developments; indeed, one could effectively explore the relations between capitalism and colonialism in northeast India.[76] However, here I use the notion of spatial fix in relation to Monyul in order to bring out the particular concatenation of events that precipitated its buffer position.

British buffer policy in west Arunachal Pradesh derived from a wider rhetoric of the buffer relating to imperial threats stemming from China and Russia. That Tibet was a buffer zone for British political and commercial interests against imperial Russia and China in the early twentieth century is well known.[77] Until the first years of the twentieth century, the British continued to treat Tibet as the buffer, but as the possibility of its annexation to China became imminent, the British became alert to the need to construct a buffer zone that lay at altitudes lower than the 'roof of the world'; this led to the displacement of the buffer from Tibet to India's northeast frontier. In other words, while Monyul was not on the defence radar of the British colonial rulers in the first years of the twentieth century, its potential as buffer came to the fore when Tibet could no longer be relied upon to act as a buffer against Britain's imperial rivals, China in particular. While earlier social relations between Tibet, Bhutan, and Monyul—of trade, rule, kinship, and pilgrimage—had given Monyul the status of 'corridor', the new relations of imperial rivalry required it to be constructed as a buffer.

Between 1899 and 1903, the British government in India received reports that Russia was trying to secure a foothold in Tibet through its own Buddhist subjects—the Buriats of Siberia. A Russian Buriat, known as Dorjev, had achieved an important position in the Tibetan monastic hierarchy and had visited the Russian tsar as the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's ambassador on a couple of occasions. It is worth noting how the functional dependence between religion and empire was pre-eminent here. Russian expansionism in Tibet was attempted through religious, rather than military, overtures, and this points to a less researched aspect of empire-building.

[76] For example, Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*; Kar, 'When was the Postcolonial?'.
[77] Lamb, *The McMahon Line*, p. 11.

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While the British were trying to make inroads into the Tibetan trade market, they had failed to even establish communication with the Dalai Lama, unlike the Russians. Convinced that Tibet had to act as the buffer between the British and Russian empires, the Indian viceroy Lord Curzon proposed sending a mission to Lhasa and, through a show of British military strength, force the Dalai Lama to acknowledge the existence of the British government in Lhasa. As a result, in 1904, Major Francis Younghusband was sent on a mission to Tibet, initially to negotiate the boundary between Tibet and the British-held state of Sikkim on the northern frontier. When, as anticipated, the talks failed, Younghusband was authorized to move deeper into Tibet. In August 1904, he occupied Lhasa and the Dalai Lama fled to Mongolian territories.

It must be noted that British interests in Tibet centred solely on the creation of a buffer state, and were not about territorial expansion. The British government did not consider it economically viable to maintain an empire that extended beyond the Himalayan range; further, it was believed that annexing Tibet would invite repercussions in the form of Chinese retaliation, which had also laid claims on Tibet in 1904. Hence, after Younghusband's mission, Tibet was not made into a British protectorate state. Instead, it was styled as a buffer state, with the opening of new trade marts and the creation of the post of a British trade agent (who also had political and diplomatic functions) in the very heart of Tibet. This action achieved a double victory for the British in that it opened the way for direct communication between British authorities in India and Tibet, which had until then been mediated by Chinese authorities.

Unlike Tibet, the tribal territories lying west to east between Bhutan and Burma (which became present-day Arunachal Pradesh) did not come under British buffer calculations in the period between 1826 and 1910. The British initially had a commercial interest in acquiring control over the *duars* or foothill passes through which trade passed. But politically, Tawang was not yet factored into British imperialist visions of a buffer. In the first years after the British annexed Assam and its neighbouring hills tracts, the dominant idea in administrative circles was that it would be impractical to extend administration to the hills, including Monyul. At this time, the main concern was the protection of British economic interests in the foothills and plains. Yet, some semblance of authority had to exist in the frontier tribal areas, so that the latter would become subject to British rules but without regular British governance.

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The inner line policy of 1873 was just such a means. It should be noted that a buffer policy with regard to the tribal tracts was in nascent formation since the inner line effectively marked off the areas that needed protection from those that did not. But the buffer potential of the tribal tracts began to be fully considered at the turn of the decade. In 1910–1911, when Chinese General Chao Erh-feng undertook a series of colonizing expeditions south of Tibet to these tribal territories on the British frontier, the latter areas became the centre of Anglo-Chinese competition. The British became aware of the vulnerability of the northeast frontier and actively sought boundary delimitation, and consequently they attempted to exert British control over these areas. In 1913, Captain F. M. Bailey and Captain H. T. Morsehead were deputed to map the boundary between these territories and Tibet. At the 1914 Simla Conference, the British government secured Tibetan agreement to a boundary alignment, which, apart from incorporating a large expanse of tribal territory, also annexed the Tawang tract.[78] While the British, Tibetan, and Chinese representatives participated in this tripartite conference, only the Tibetan regent Lonchen Shatra and the British representative signed the boundary document, as the Chinese agent disagreed with some of the clauses that had been included.[79] Under the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Tibetan resistance had grown considerably stronger, while the 1911 Chinese Revolution, which ended Manchu rule, had destabilized Chinese authority in Tibet. The Tibetan acquiescence to the McMahon boundary was conditional on securing British aid in demarcating the Sino-Tibetan boundary. In 1937, Norbu Dhondhup, the British agent in Lhasa, mentioned in official correspondence that Tibet had agreed to cede Tawang to the British on the understanding that the latter would help them settle their long-standing questions with China.[80]

As with Tibet, the British buffer strategy in these frontier territories was propelled by the threat of Chinese territorial expansion. Charles Bell, political officer at Kalimpong, expressed the concern that if Tibet were to fall in Chinese hands, it would eliminate the buffer and put pressure on India's northeast frontier.[81] Drawing the Indo-Tibetan boundary in 1914 did not mean that the British were interested in extending regular

[78] Gupta, 'The McMahon Line', p. 522.
[79] Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*; Lamb, *The McMahon Line*.
[80] Extract from a letter from R. B. Norbu Dhondhup, 1937.
[81] Bell, 'The North East Frontier of India', p. 223.

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administration to the limits of the line, nor in mapping a 'geo-body', but rather in continuing with the inner line/outer line logic where administration would be latent beyond the inner line. A buffer was needed between India and a Tibet under the control of China, and its creation required the boundary to be delimited. But the whole enterprise of boundary marking in the North East Frontier was not intended to expand state presence up to the boundary, but to encourage a *zone of difference and indifference* or, simply, enclave-making.

With regard to Monyul, British deliberations went further, as they were unable to decide whether or not to call Monyul Tibetan; although they were generally inclined to consider these areas as distinct from Tibet proper, they also admitted that 'Monbas' (sic) were culturally 'more Tibetan'. That is, if one could grade the borderlanders, Monpas would approximate a Tibetan-ness more than they would plains-dwelling Hindus.[82] Yet, they decided to include Tawang, along with the rest of Monyul, within the boundary. To borrow naturalist Frank Kingdon-Ward's dramatic words, 'with Monyul a Tibetan province, the enemy [China] would already be within her [the British empire's] gates'.[83] Buffer thinking continued into the late colonial period with J. P. Mills writing in 1950 about the British fear of Chinese imperial aggression: 'India must hold the sub-Himalayan belt somehow because if she had China sitting on the edge of the plains I doubt if Assam would be tenable; and she could not afford to lose Assam with its wealth of coal, oil, tea and timber.'[84]

A number of British administrators called attention to the *hills* as a barrier to forces invading the *plains*. Following the creation of the McMahon boundary in 1914, Charles Bell wrote, 'We have thus gained a frontier standing back everywhere about a hundred miles from the plains of India. *This intervening country consists of difficult hills and valleys, and so constitutes an excellent barrier*.'[85] That is, the hills had value only in so far as they could provide a deterrent to enemy forces that could wreck British economic interests in the plains. Thus, for instance, J. H. Hutton wrote about the nature of administration in the hills, 'The original occupation of the hills, both along the frontier and between the two valleys of the Surma and the Brahmaputra, was in the nature of an *insurance policy*, first taken out about 100 years ago, for the peaceable

[82] Mills, 'Problems of the Assam-Tibet Frontier', p. 158.
[83] Kingdon-Ward, 'The Assam Himalaya', p. 618.
[84] Mills, 'Problems of the Assam-Tibet Frontier', p. 160.
[85] Bell, *Tibet*, p. 155. Emphasis added.

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development of the plains.'[86] Note the phrase 'insurance policy' which can easily be read as 'buffer'.

Such an attitude towards the hills or highlanders on the part of the imperial state further shows that hills communities often remained beyond the reach of 'civilization' not because they actively opted for flight, as James Scott suggests,[87] but also because the state denied them access to the lowlands and, as the case of the inner line between the hills and plains communities shows, disrupted customary and long-standing patterns of interaction between the two. To state it in extreme fashion, hills are not simply 'zones of refuge' but could also be 'zones of refuse' for states who are only concerned with protecting the core spaces of empire.

From buffer to border

Following independence, India found itself in a changed position vis-à-vis China, confronting the latter as one militarized nation-state against another and entrusted with protecting the borders it had inherited from the colonial state. With growing political turmoil across the border in Tibet, and the rise in India–China border tensions, military exercises at the frontier were appended to the policy of non-interference in Monyul. In 1951, Major Robert Khating led an expedition to Tawang to establish the first Assam Rifles paramilitary post there, guided by local Monpas led by Pema Gombu, who later became headman of Lhou village in Tawang. A locally published biography of Pema Gombu describes how local people supported the first official expedition of the post-colonial Indian government to Tawang.[88] Many people told me that the Monpas had requested that the Indian state occupy their areas since they wanted to be free of Tibetan rule. The discursive element of 'request' introduces power symmetry to the creation of the boundary, whereby the Monpas' wishes are seen as being taken into account. One is not sure, however, whether this element is a later addition to local legend, mediated by official representations.

Along with military activities, development programmes in the post-colonial period modified the previous approach of 'indifference' to

[86] Hutton, 'Problems of Reconstruction', p. 107. Emphasis added.

[87] Scott, *The Art of not being Governed*.

[88] 'A Brief Biography of Shri. Pema Gombu', Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, n.d., a copy of which I acquired from Pema Gombu's son Urgen Tsering, chairman of Lhou Secondary School, Tawang.

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the Monyul border tract. In 1950, a massive earthquake, which tore apart the northeastern region, provided a further excuse for the post-colonial government to penetrate Monyul and other parts of NEFA through relief and rehabilitation measures. Alert to the risk of Chinese incursion, officers in these frontier areas had long been demanding development measures, and the earthquake finally gave them the rationale for procuring increased developmental and welfare budgets.[89]

When Chinese troops briefly occupied Monyul during October 1962, this event marked the denouement of the buffer practices. Its immediate aftermath marked the moment of border closure, when porous boundaries were reconstituted as the limits of national territory beyond which existed the non-national (both geographically and figuratively). This was the moment at which the boundary physically drew the contours of the geo-body. The official representation of Monyul in the contemporary period is that of a disputed territory caught up in the border conflict between two nation-states.

Neeru Nanda, who served as deputy commissioner to Tawang in the 1970s, remarks in her popular book *Tawang: The Land of Mon* that the loyalty of the border people always has to be earned, for governments in border areas anywhere in the world will invariably get the loyalty they deserve—perhaps more, but never less.[90] The particular context for the loyalty of the Monpas being called into question is the India–China war, during which Monpa areas were overrun by Chinese troops and subsequent to which Monpas came to be regarded by the mainstream media as a people of 'uncertain patriotism'.[91] Monpas are frequently suspected of harbouring anti-national feelings due to their occupation by the Chinese from October to December 1962.

During my fieldwork, many people reported that when they went down to the plains, they were frequently asked 'Do you consider yourself Indians or Chinese?' The element of suspicion is possibly fuelled by rumours that during the 1962 war, local Monpa men helped—even guided—Chinese soldiers into Indian territory. In his account of the India–China war, G. S. Bhargava, who served as principal information officer to the Government of India, wrote, 'At Dirang [West Kameng] a tribal youth … asked me if, "since the Chinese had left the Indians would come back". In other words, he bracketed his countrymen with the

[89] Guyot-Réchard, 'Reordering a Border Space', pp. 949–951.
[90] Nanda, *Tawang*.
[91] Ibid.

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enemy. In the circumstances, it was too much to expect the tribals to resist the Chinese militarily.'[92] Inhabiting the geographical and cultural margins of the nation, Monpas are thus subject to the suspicions cast on those considered incompletely Indian or as 'Indian, but not quite'.

In the post-colonial period, development continues to be a means of integrating Monyul into mainstream Indian spaces, but the development is of a selective kind which lays emphasis on roads and connectivity, and less on healthcare, education, or employment. Roads are constructed from a military point of view, connecting main towns and army settlements rather than rural areas, and those roads that are not strategically important are neglected. As an Indian officer remarked about the road leading to Seppa in East Kameng district (which bifurcates from the Bomdila-Tawang main road at a place called Nechipu), 'the road not being a defence priority received least priority by the Border road task force'.[93] Army settlements have been built at a frequency of every 30–40 kilometre stretch on the main road, which is the national highway that winds its way from the Assam plains to the India-Tibet border. Monyul's status as disputed territory guides dominant images of it as both a marginal border and militarized zone.

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[92] Bhargava, *The Battle of NEFA*, p. 62.

[93] Bhattacharjee, *Enticing Frontiers*, p. 154.

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