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Airy Infrastructures:

Anxieties and Eastern Himalayan 'Remoteness' (1945-1962)

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Anxious State(s)

In mid-1945, the Assam government and military officials discussed the threat of a "sustained attack" on an Assam Rifles outpost in Walong.[1] In the easternmost Lohit Valley of the North-East Frontier, Walong sits near the Tibetan outpost of Rima, at the junction of British India, Tibet and Burma. Concerned about its vulnerability, the Assam Rifles commandant suggested airborne supply as the only way to sustain the outpost against possible invasions by China. Discussions also proposed training platoons in parachute jumping for emergency reinforcements. Although some of the pressures of the Second World War had eased by this point, including Japan's occupation of Burma and the 1944 invasion of India, China's wartime presence reignited anxieties about securing the Tibetan border.

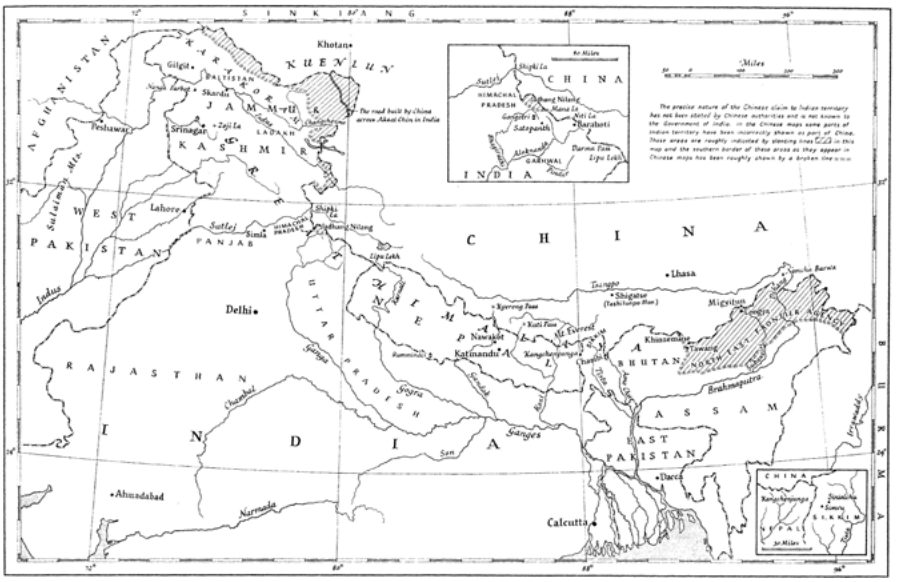
[1] Arunachal Pradesh State Archives (APSA), Correspondence, 28.08.1945 in "Defense of the North-East Frontier" TR/124/45/AD. Here "sustained" means holding mountain territory by maintaining supply lines.

In 1944, British officers had set up an outpost in Walong due to tensions with Tibetan authorities in Rima. Political Officer[2] J.H.F. Williams previously attempted to build landing strips for light aircraft to supply outposts and parachute troops.[3] He warned that an "air-minded enemy" could replicate this tactic if they matched British aerial capabilities. Given the difficulty of maintaining roads in the high-altitude terrain, officials debated withdrawing from the outpost unless airborne supply was feasible. The Royal Air Force (RAF) conducted surveys but found that large aircraft could not descend below 14,000 feet here because of the low density of the air, complicating supply drops because parachutes would not be effective.[4] Meanwhile, some officials dismissed the likelihood of an attack through Walong due to the rugged terrain.

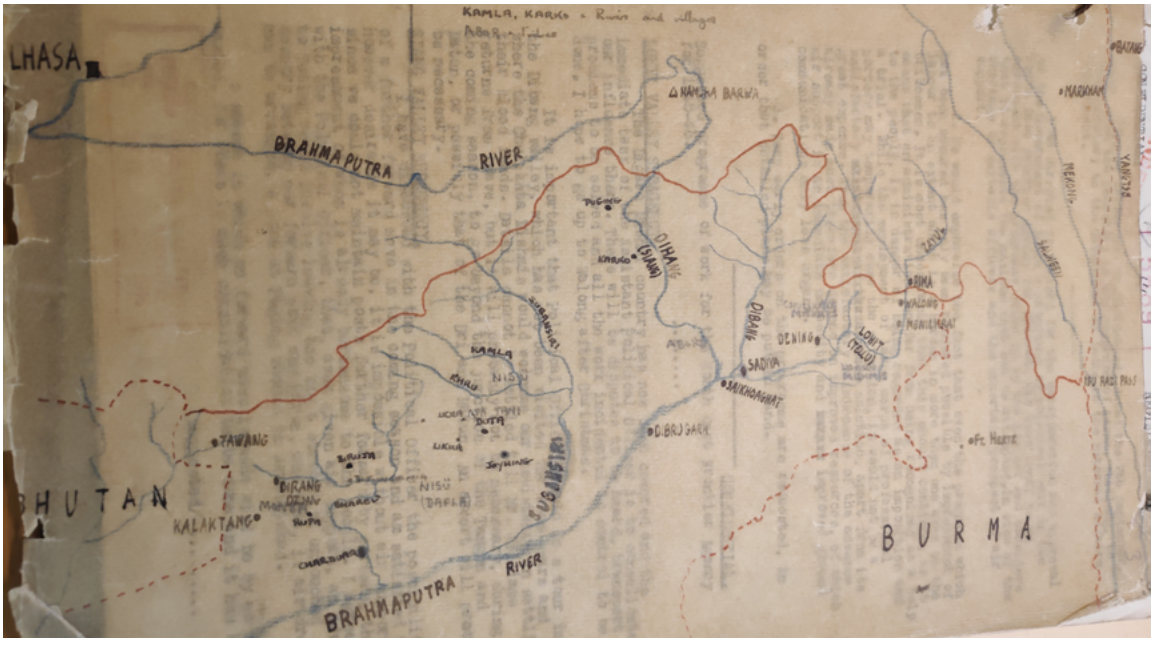
[2] Political Officers were agents of British indirect rule posted to frontier areas. Representing state presence when necessary, they exemplied 'thin' governance.

[3] The British Library (BL), "J.H.F Williams' Tour Diary, September–November 1944" in G.E.D. Walker's collection, MSS EUR D1191/1.

[4] APSA, Memo to Political Officer, 24.10.1945, TR/124/45/AD.



← "The Geography and Ethnics of India's Northern Frontiers" showing the North-East Frontier in 1960.
Source: Caroe 1960: 302.



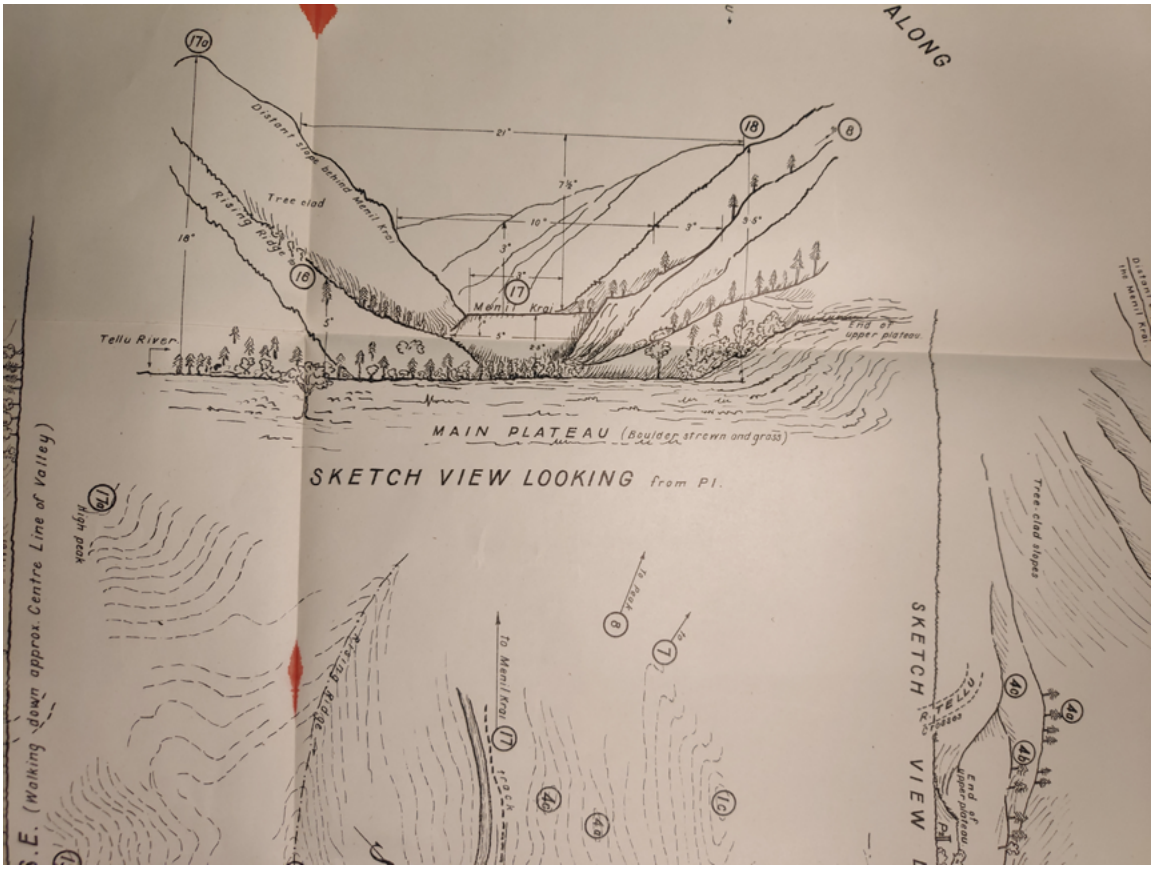
↓ Sketch map of the North-East Frontier, showing Rima and Walong 1946.
Source: BL, IOR/L/PS/12/3119.

However, in October 1945, G.E.D. Walker, another Political Officer, warned against abandoning the Walong outpost, arguing that it would undermine British efforts to uphold the McMahon Line, the border with Tibet.[5] Significantly, he believed that doing so would weaken British prestige among the upland Mishmi communities, whose loyalty determined the state's ability to assert sovereignty, with its seasonally 'thin' presence as a "fair-weather state" (Guyot-Réchard 2016: 21). This anxiety over frontier loyalties persisted into postcolonial India (Gagné 2017). Due to the rarefied air above Walong, airborne-supply plans were ultimately abandoned. India later built temporary landing places and supply-drop zones to assert territorial claims and reassure local populations.

[5] APSA, Letter from Walker, 13.10.1945, TR/124/45/AD.

Frictions of, and Above, Terrain

These episodes highlight the British Indian state's longstanding strategy of maintaining minimal or 'airy' infrastructures despite geopolitical contestation. Airy here has three meanings. First, it refers to the state's light footprint. Second, it signifies the arrival of aerial technology in the 1940s with the Second World War, to overcome rugged terrain. Finally, it indicates some of the inconsistent anxieties that erupted around border security and state prestige. The paradox of such sparse infrastructure-building despite intense "cartographic anxiety" (Krishna 1994) is my focus in this article. Why was state presence so limited in these contested borderlands when infrastructure often symbolizes sovereignty and influences local populations (Rippa, Murton and Rest 2020)?



Sketches of the Walong plateau with 'voluminous' dimensions.
Source: Walter E. Cross, Lohit Valley Reconnaissance (December–February 1942), BL, IOR/ L/ PS/12/4615.

I argue that deliberate state policies maintained remoteness, even with access to aerial technology, aiming to keep these areas isolated despite the geopolitical anxieties.

James Scott has suggested that "distance-demolishing technologies" such as roads, railways and aerial infrastructure integrated remote upland regions after the Second World War (Scott 2009: xii, 11). Contrary to Scott's thesis, I contend that aerial provisioning, chosen over permanent infrastructure to cut costs, in fact, maintained remoteness rather than fostering state integration of peripheries after the war. Using archival sources, I present a statist view of the 'thin' infrastructural experiments of the 1940s, contrasting them with what emerged during the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Colonial and postcolonial officials saw upland terrain's remoteness as a strategic defensive asset – a belief that collapsed during the 1962 war, prompting India's shift towards greater militarization. While not all frontiers are necessarily remote, remoteness on the Walong border was deliberately produced through limited infrastructure, with aims beyond simply resource concerns, such as projecting state presence to rivals and local populations. The anxieties underpinning these actions are obscured by Westphalian sovereignty models, which miss the "voluminous" (Billé 2020: 5) dimensions of territoriality. As aerial technology is central in modern warfare, I use this approach to help read air-based historical events.

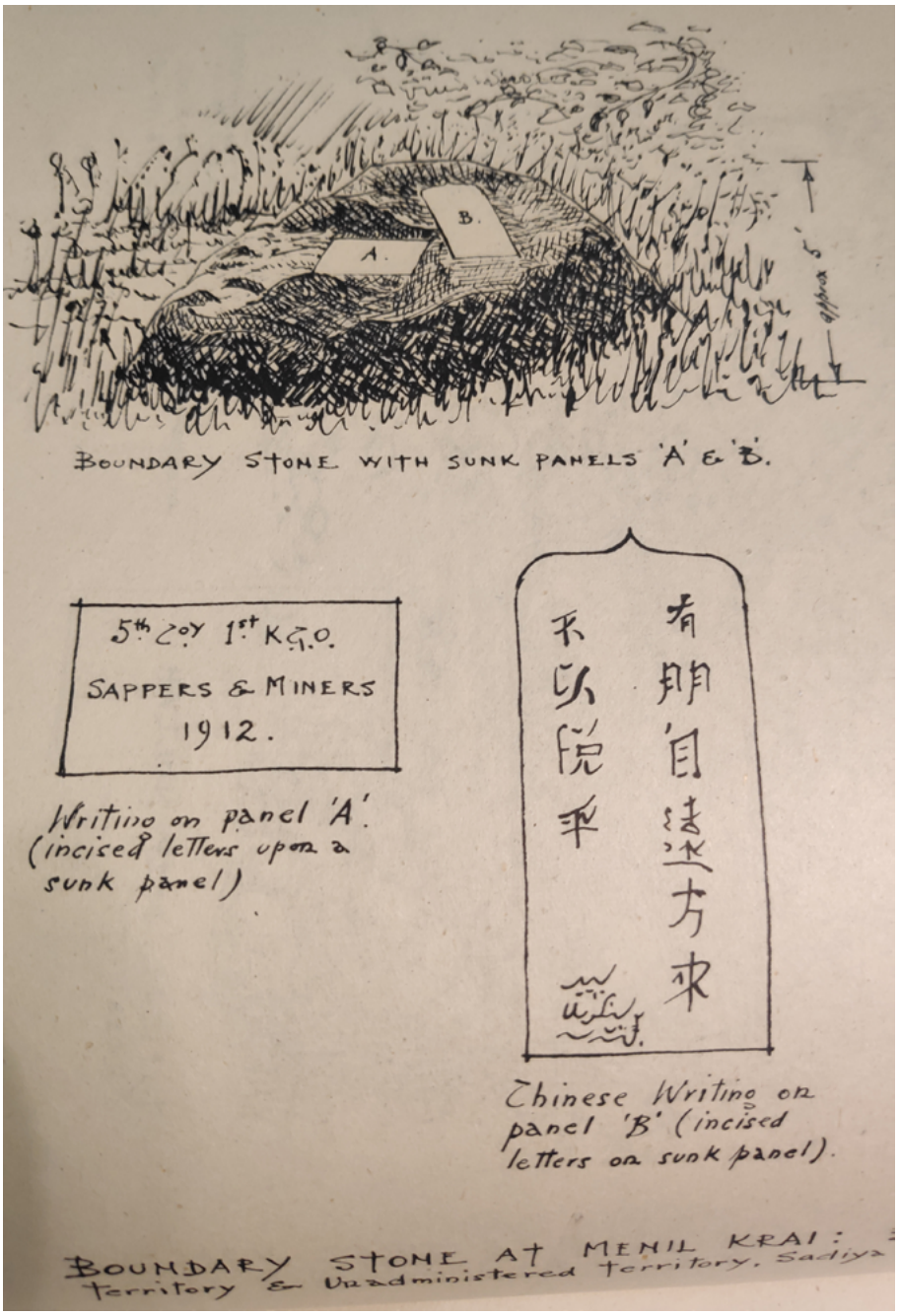
The concept of "lag" in voluminous approaches to studying sovereignty and territory highlights the friction between time and terrain, adding depth to spaces traditionally viewed as flat (Harris 2020). We can extend this by considering aerial space, enabled by 1940s air power, as a new domain for sovereignty, overcoming terrain and introducing volume into governance. Though 'thin', the skies thus became a platform for sovereignty and securitization.[6] Postwar and postcolonial policies on the North-East Frontier (now Arunachal Pradesh) continued "selective state-making" (Gohain 2019, 2020), maintaining remoteness for strategic purposes while disconnecting people's regional socio-economic ties (Saxer and Andersson 2019). Minimal infrastructure here reflected deliberate state policy, leaving the region ambiguous and inconsistent until the 1960s despite episodic geopolitical anxieties. Instead of durable infrastructure for local connectivity, British and Indian policies favored small airfields and drop zones near outposts like Walong.

[6] Rarefied air was an impediment in 1945. Low-density air over China's mountainous western borders has been a strategic asset to India in more recent times. For details see Som 2017.

Airy States

In the 1940s, Sino-Tibetan cartographic tensions and incursions along the North-East Frontier, drew officials' focus to the McMahon Line. In 1935, the British Foreign Secretary Olaf Caroe who began pushing a policy shift towards consolidating the border, "rediscovered" this line using 1914 documents and maps referencing an agreement with Tibet (Maxwell 2016: 102; see also Mehra 1974).[7] After India's 1947 decolonization, these cartographic anxieties escalated into territorial conflicts. Following Tibet's annexation by China in 1950, India and China engaged in infrastructural competition in the Himalaya, driven by concerns over territorial control and population loyalties (Guyot-Réchard 2016). Minimal infrastructure projects in the 1940s, supported by aerial supply, reflected a governance approach of maintaining remoteness in Walong, unlike India's use of its air force for famine relief and counterinsurgency in the Naga and Mizo Hills bordering Burma.

[7] "Rediscovered" appears in academic and policy debates because British officials did not define this border until periodic tensions with Tibet or China made it necessary.



Sketches of contested boundary markers of 1912. Source: Walter E. Cross, Lohit Valley Reconnaissance (December–February 1942), BL, IOR/ L/ PS/12/4615.

In October 1962, despite Walker's belief that the terrain of the Lohit Valley would deter invasion[8], China entered Indian territory, including Walong, routing Indian forces before declaring a unilateral ceasefire in November. India underestimated the logistical challenges, with Chinese troops climbing only 5,000 feet from the Tibetan Plateau, compared to the 20,000 feet that Indian forces had to scale. China's rapid road-building outpaced India's, which relied on scarce local labor and mules (Ispahani 1989: 172–73). Oral histories suggest Chinese soldiers postured as "benevolent," helping locals build houses and harvest crops, unlike Indian forces (Gohain 2020: 25). Despite China's

[8] BL, Newspaper collection, G.E.D. Walker, "Letter to the Editor," The Times 31.10.1962.

The river Lohit (Luit in Assamese) enters India near Kibithu, flows alongside Walong and joins the River Brahmaputra in Assam. Photo: A. J. T. Johnsingh, 2012. WikiCommons.

military superiority, border populations aligned with India, seeing it as a weaker but negotiable military power. India, wary of aiding another Chinese invasion, forbade road construction near the frontier, continuing the colonial policy of limiting infrastructure to maintain remoteness (Guyot-Réchard 2016). Only recently India has shifted to building roads and airfields to secure the Walong sector (PTI 2015; Bhaumik 2017).

Since the 1962 Sino–Indian War, security anxieties and infrastructure development have escalated, particularly considering ongoing cartographic and territorial disputes fueled by asymmetric infrastructural competition in the Himalayas. In regions like western Tawang, Indian military "hyper-presence" is notable, as Gohain (2020: 25) observes. The disputed Sino–Indian border refers not only to two-dimensional cartographic lines for these nation-states but encompasses the whole of Arunachal Pradesh.

Conclusion

Selective state-making through airy infrastructures kept some eastern Himalayan border regions of India remote despite the state's geopolitical anxieties. In the 1940s, officials relied on minimal infrastructure, using aerial provisioning from makeshift airfields and drop zones. This sparked mixed reactions, reassuring populations of state presence, and the state of its own prestige, albeit both were thin. In contrast, China's superior 'thick' road infrastructure in 1962 caused anxiety among the local people. In both cases, infrastructure primarily served state needs over local communities. Securing voluminous territory (upland terrain and airspace) entailed decades of lags due to the challenging topography and thin air. Today, geopolitical reorientations and grand infrastructure projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative fuel discursive skirmishes and territorial anxieties among rivals. Such transnational mega-infrastructural projects also bring

politically peripheralized highland Asian regions into stark view, including how new forms of connectivity and remoteness result from these interventions (Rippa, Murton and Rest 2020: 85). Discursive projections of remoteness in Asian highlands overlook historical connectivity via routes and pathways that populations have long navigated (Harris 2013; Saxer and Andersson 2019). Projections of remoteness can be actualized by states through the voluminous politics of airy infrastructures.

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