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## NEFA AND THE 1962 WAR: ROLE OF LOCAL INHABITANTS IN THE WAR EFFORT

### *Introduction*

R.N. Haldipur, a prominent administrator and political officer for the NEFA, once said that the “Chinese attack of 1962 evoked a lot of attention and stimulated interest within academic circles on North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)”.<sup>1</sup> This scholastic development brought India’s northeast region as a whole into a new nationalist discourse.<sup>2</sup> This literature, for better understanding, can be systematically arranged into two sections. One set of literature, for instance, focuses mainly on ‘the methods and policy for administering this large territory,’ besides the 1962 war and the bravery and sacrifices made by the Indian Army. Another stream of literature pertains to, inter alia, anthropological, political, and social-cultural studies, such as Verrier Elwin’s work *A Philosophy of NEFA*<sup>3</sup>; Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf’s work, *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours*:

- 1 R.N. Haldipur, “NEFA: An Introduction,” *Bulletin of Tibetology* 3. no. 2 (1966): 72.
- 2 Sanjib Baruah, “Nationalizing Space: Cosmetic Federalism and the Politics of development in Northeast India”, *Development and Change*, 34. no. 5, (2003): 915-39.
- 3 Verrier Elwin, *A Philosophy of NEFA* (Delhi: Isha Book, 2003), (reprinted).

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*A Primitive Civilisation of the Eastern Himalayas*<sup>4</sup>; J.N. Choudhury's *The Tribal Culture and History of Arunachal Pradesh*<sup>5</sup>, among others.

However, there is limited literature, primarily in fragmentary form, that focuses on the participation and contribution of the local inhabitants of the then-NEFA in the war efforts. The contribution or participation of unidentified NEFA porters and villagers, who assisted the Indian Army and civil administration (in their own capacity) to defend the nation from Chinese aggression, has largely gone unnoticed. In terms of creating roads, airfields, and garrisons for Indian troops, or gathering information, this article details some of the efforts made by the local residents to support the war efforts. The article is not a comprehensive analysis of the 1962 war. It is based on the memoirs of the civilian and military officers who had served in this region before and during the 1962 war and of the villagers. Primary and some archival sources, such as the Arunachal Pradesh *District's Gazetteer*, the *Census of India 1961*, *Assam Information*, *Akashvani*, and secondary information gathered from books, journal articles, websites, and reports, constitute the main sources of data for the study.

### ***Background: The North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)***

**T**he NEFA, the present-day Arunachal Pradesh, is in the extreme northeastern part of India. The topography of NEFA is mostly mountainous (90 percent of the territory), "hardly any of it flat."<sup>6</sup> There are five major river valleys, namely, Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit, and Tirap. These river valleys have diverse temperatures and are surrounded by difficult terrain, spiky ridges, and deep gorges. It shares a long international border with China and Tibet to the northeast and north (1,080 km), Bhutan to the west (160 km), and Myanmar to the east (440 km).

The pre-modern history of NEFA is concealed in mythology connected with Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> However, its modern history can be traced

4 Fűrér-Haimendorf, Christoph Von, *The Apa Tanis and their Neighbours: A primitive society of the Eastern Himalayas*, (London: Routledge, 2004), (reprinted).

5 Jyotirindra Nath Choudhury, ed., *The Tribal Culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh*. (New Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 1990).

6 Haldipur, "NEFA: An Introduction," 73.

7 "Cultural Roots of Arunachal Pradesh", *National Information Centre*, (Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology), Government of India, last modified January 19, 2019. <https://blog.mygov.in/cultural-roots-of-arunachal-pradesh/>

back to colonial British subjugation of the frontier after the Anglo-Burmese war (1826-1861). The first step towards bringing NEFA under administrative control was taken in 1882, when the colonial administration appointed an assistant political advisor.<sup>8</sup> Before that, "Arunachal Pradesh was an independent area without any administrative control."<sup>9</sup> According to Bertil Lintner, author and strategist consultant, the tribes of this frontier have never been directly ruled by any outside power. Though the Tibetan rulers used to collect taxes from Tawang and other border areas, they never had direct rule over these areas.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, N.N. Osik (1999) argued that although "the powerful Ahom king of Assam had claimed suzerainty over a large part of the region, he never managed to subjugate them."<sup>11</sup>

Besides, in the early twentieth century, the Chinese made a few unsuccessful attempts to penetrate the frontier region. For instance, in 1911, the Chinese tried to assert their influence by persuading the Mishmi tribe to build a track through the Mishmi hills to the plains of Assam, but the Mishmis refused.<sup>12</sup> In truth, Chinese attempts to influence the region promoted the British India Government to strengthen the administration on this frontier, which eventually led to the Shimla conventions of 1913 and 1914 for proper demarcation of the NEFA territorial boundaries.

The frontier got its distinct identity with the creation of the North East Frontier Tract (NEFT) in 1914. It was divided into four frontier tracts and administratively kept under the control of the Governor of Assam. After India's independence in 1947, NEFT was put under Part "B" of the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution as a part of Assam. Thus, the Government of Assam assumed

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8 "NEFA - A Rich Tapestry", *Assam Information*, Directorate of Information & Public Relations, Gauhati, Government of Assam, XIV. no. 12, (1963a): 16.

9 "History: Formation of Upper Siang", District Upper Siang (Official Website), *Government of Arunachal Pradesh* (b), District Upper Siang, last update September 15, 2023. <https://upper-siang.nic.in/history/>

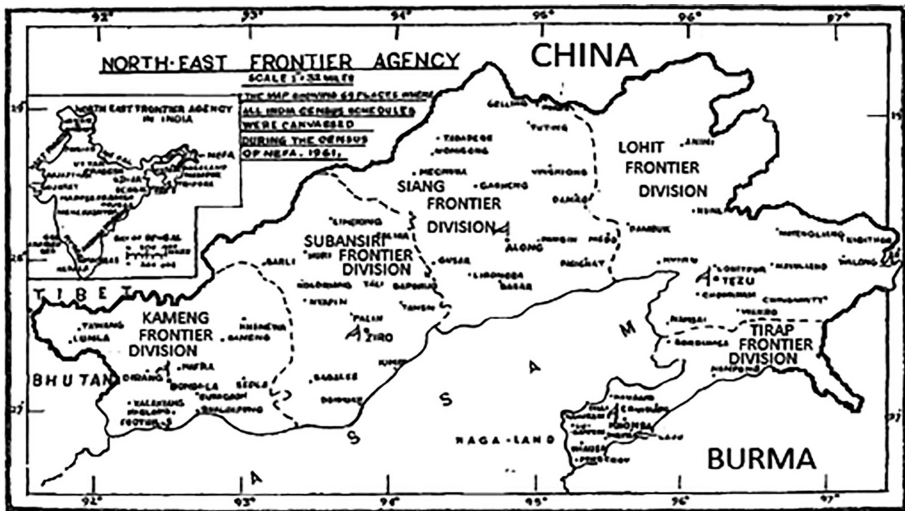
10 Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China and the struggle for Asia's most Volatile Frontier*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2016): 33.

11 N.N. Osik, *Modern history of Arunachal Pradesh (1825-1997)*, (Itanagar: Himalayan Publisher, 1999): 2.

12 S. Dutta Choudhury, ed., *Gazetteer of India: Arunachal Pradesh Lohit District*, (Shillong: Director of Information and Public Relation, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1978): 63.

administrative jurisdiction over the NEFT, and the discretionary power of the Governor of Assam was divested.<sup>13</sup> Later on, the Government of India decided to administer NEFT as an exclusive area through the Governor of Assam as an agent to the President of India. Each frontier tract was administered under the charge of a 'Political Officer'.

Map 1: North East Frontier Agency (NEFA)



Source: Thanga, L.B., ed., (1966) 'Census of India, 1961 North-East Frontier Agency', (Part II-A: General population tables and NEFA special tables), Ministry of Home Affairs Office of the Registrar General XXIV (1966).

In 1951, the NEFT was reconstituted and designated as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1954. It was divided into six frontier divisions: Kameng Frontier Division, Subansiri Frontier Division, Siang Frontier Division, Lohit Frontier Division, Tirap Frontier Division, and Tuensang Frontier Division. Later on, Tuensang Frontier Division was excluded from NEFA in 1957 and merged with the Naga Hills district of Assam. The remaining five frontier divisions were named after each major river that flows through them. From then on, until 1965, the areas were administratively brought under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), and each frontier division was under the charge of an officer belonging to the Indian Frontier Administrative Service

13 Sokhep Kri, ed., *Gazetteer of India: Arunachal Pradesh, State Gazetteer of Arunachal Pradesh*, Volume -1, (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2010): 187.

(IFAS). However, after the 1962 India-China war, the administrative supervision and control of NEFA were transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in August 1965. It remained so until the attainment of the Union Territory in 1972, and it was granted the full-fledged statehood of Arunachal Pradesh on February 20, 1987.<sup>14</sup>

The NEFA is also home to 26 major tribes (according to the 2011 Census) and more than 100 sub-tribes that inhabit the different frontier divisions. Some of these tribes live on both sides of the India-China border, divided by the modern concept of nation-state boundaries and political sovereignty. "One among them is the Mishmi tribes, who live in NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh) and Zayu County (Tibet)."<sup>15</sup> There are four sub-tribes or clans of Mishmi; three of them reside on the Indian side and one on the Chinese side (known as Deng in China).<sup>16</sup> Until the 1962 war, these ethnic groups often crossed the border for trade and hunting. Besides that, the population of NEFA is extremely heterogeneous in terms of people's culture, physical appearance, languages, religion, and political organisation. But to the outside world, they 'look' the same, and their physical appearance has often resulted in people mistaking them for Chinese or foreigners.

### **1962 Chinese Aggression and NEFA**

On October 20, 1962, the Chinese launched a sudden, well-coordinated attack on India, both in the eastern and western sectors.<sup>17</sup> In his book *Himalayan Blunder*, Brigadier (Brig.) John P. Dalve describes how Indian forces suffered heavy losses in this sudden attack, but they fought back valiantly with 'limited resources, inferior weapons, and ill-trained for mountain warfare',<sup>18</sup> in contrast

14 "Government: The Past and Present", *Government of Arunachal Pradesh (a) (Official State Portal)*, last modified August 17, 2022, <https://www.arunachalpradesh.gov.in/655-2/>

15 Ambika Aiyadurai and Claire Seungeun Lee, "Living on the Sino-Indian Border: The Story of the Mishmis in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India," *Asian Ethnology*, 76. no. 2 (2017): 368.

16 Aiyadurai and Lee, "Sino-Indian Border", 369.

17 Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1970). 357-358.

18 John P. Dalvi, *Himalayan Blunder: The Angry Truth about India's Most Crushing Military Disaster* (Bombay: Thacker and Company Ltd, 1969): 1.

to well-equipped Chinese troops supported by artillery firepower. In the eastern sector, after several border skirmishes on the Thangla, the war began on October 20, 1962, at Dhola Ridge on the southern bank of the Namka Chu River.

By the end of October 1962, the war across the mountainous terrain was scattered across frontier divisions. In general, most of the battlegrounds in these frontier divisions were at heights above 10,000 feet above sea level, where motorable roads to the border posts did not exist. The ammunition, rations, and other supplies to these places were either air-dropped or carried by porters and mule drivers. For example, in the Kameng frontier division, 'beyond Tawang, ponies, mules, and porters were the only modes of transport'.<sup>19</sup>

### *a) China's tactics and their advantages*

Furthermore, Brigadier (Brig.) Dalvi stated the strengths and advantages of Chinese troops, where he quoted Brigadier Thompson (the military correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*) and said the Chinese have better land access as they have been building frontier roads, 'CL 9 road up to Thangla'<sup>20</sup> and airfields since they annexed Tibet.<sup>21</sup> According to John W. Garver, the other distinct advantage of China's People Liberation Army (PLA) was the number of troops, weaponry (heavy weapons), and communication network, while Indian forces were short of all of these, plus winter clothing and food.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, by 1962, after a decade of their annexation and presence in Tibet, the Chinese PLAs were well acclimatised to the weather and high altitudes of the Himalayas. Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist and writer, argued in his book *China's India War* that China had deployed its troops to the north side of

19 Major K. C. Praval, "1962 War: The Chinese Invasion –I," *Indian Defence Review (IRD) Blog*, (March 11, 2011). Accessed November 20, 2021. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/1962-war-the-chinese-invasion-i/2/>

20 Col. Alok Mathur, "Indo-China War 1962: Tears of River Nam Ka Chu," *Indian Defence Review (IDF) Blog*, (October 31, 2020). Accessed November 20, 2021, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/indo-china-war-1962-tears-of-river-nam-ka-chu/>

21 Dalvi, *Himalayan Blunder*, 64.

22 John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962", in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. Alastair I. Johnston and Robert S. Rose (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006): 121.

the Thangla Ridge well before the attack took place in order to get acclimatised to the high altitudes of the Border Mountains.<sup>23</sup>

Besides these logistic, network, and weaponry advantages, China's PLA also deployed the tactics of 'deceptions' and 'the use of spies' and coordinated their attacks. For example, P.K. Gautam argues that the Chinese army ruses the Indian authorities by 'wearing tribal dress or captured uniforms and infiltrated into Indian territories close enough to open deadly fire with concealed weapons.'<sup>24</sup> The Chinese authority also recruited thousands of (local) Tibetans and used them as porters, guides, and interpreters during the war, which again became a source of strength and mobility. According to J. B. Calvin, Lieutenant Commander of the US Navy, Chinese troops had planted agents, long before the outbreak of war, on the south side of the Thangla Ridge (on Indian side) among road gangs, porters and muleteers working in border areas.<sup>25</sup>

Most of them were planted in those border areas or villages of NEFA where the local languages or dialects are closely related to the Tibetan language.<sup>26</sup> In a way, this makes it easier for them to hide their Tibetan (China) identity. In some cases, their (Chinese Tibetan) similar appearance (both physically and culturally) or look-alike with locals sometimes misidentifies local inhabitants as Chinese spies. Besides, in the Kameng frontier division, many of the junior commanders of the PLA were found disguised as Tibetans and conducted reconnaissance mission.<sup>27</sup>

Through these agents, which are the main source of human intelligence, they have gathered all the significant information, starting from details of the

23 Bertil Lintner, *China's India War: A Collision Course on the Roof of the World*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press (India), 2018): xiv.

24 P. K. Gautam, "Learning Lessons and Revisiting Myths from Kameng," *Journal of Defence Studies*, New Delhi, 6. no. 4, (2012): 141-154.

25 James Barnard Calvin, "The China-India Border War (1962)", *Bloomington IN: Marine Corps Command and Staff College* (Marine Corps Development and Education Command Quantico), Virginia, (2 April 1984). Accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/CJB.htm>; see also Lintner, *China's India War*.

26 Citing Nicholas Eftimiades's work "Chinese Intelligence Operation", Lintner argued that China had deployed Tibetan speaking spies into NEFA's Tibetan-speaking areas well in advance before the war and gathered information about the terrain and other intelligence (see Lintner, 2018).

27 Praval, "1962 War".

terrain and Indian military strategy, the location of Indian army posts (outposts), and troop movements. In addition, there were instances where Chinese authorities used the ethnic proximity of their border tribes, such as Deng of Zayu County (part of Tibet), in their propaganda to win the hearts and minds of the Mishmi tribe<sup>28</sup> of the Lohit frontier much before the 1962 war. During their occupation, the Chinese forces also used Menba, from Tsona or Cona County, Tibet<sup>29</sup> as a translator in the Kameng frontier division.<sup>30</sup> China had done all this strategic planning for years without being detected. Col. Alok Mathur wrote that-

*"None of the Indian intelligence agencies i.e. Intelligence Bureau (IB), SSB and military intelligence, including the aerial reconnaissance mission, knew anything about this buil[d]up and development."*<sup>31</sup>

### ***b) Indian troops defying odds and defending against the Chinese aggression***

Unlike the Chinese advantages, motorable roads and connectivity were 'almost non-existent in NEFA'<sup>32</sup> During the First Five-Year Plan (1951-1956), the civil administration constructed several roads and other infrastructural projects with the support of local inhabitants. Leo Rose and Margaret Fisher, however, claimed that "such infrastructure and development projects were still

28 Before 1962, some of Mishmi tribes were reportedly 'influenced by the Chinese propaganda of India as their enemy', see Aiyadurai and Lee, "Sino-Indian Border", 378-379.

29 Cona is located in Shannan in south Tibet Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China. Their presence made the locals even more suspicious as being Chinese spies.

30 Ajai Shukla and Sonia T. Shukla, "The 1962 war: How China lost the battle for hearts", *Business Standard*, October 20, 2012. Accessed December 23, 2021, <https://www.rediff.com/news/slide-show/slide-show-1-the-1962-war-how-china-lost-the-battle-for-hearts/20121030.htm#1>

31 Col. Alok Mathur, "Indo-China War 1962: Tears of River Nam Ka Chu", *Indian Defence Review (IDF) Blog*, October 31, 2020. Accessed November 20, 2021, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/indo-china-war-1962-tears-of-river-nam-ka-chu/>

32 Major General G.G. Dwivedi (Retd.) and Major General PJS Sandhu. (Retd.), "1962 war – The Unknown Battles: Operations in Subansiri and Siang Frontier Division," *U.S.I. Journal* (The United Service Institution of India), CXLIV. no. 597, July-September 2014. Accessed December 23, 2021, <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/1962-war-the-unknown-battles-operations-in-subansiri-and-siang-frontier-divisions/>

limited to the foothills, garrison towns, and surrounding areas of the divisional headquarters".<sup>33</sup> Moreover, whatever roads that already existed in the mountainous region were narrow and muddy, and "sometimes jungle closed on both sides almost camouflaged the path".<sup>34</sup> During the monsoon season, such paths were almost non-existent because heavy rains caused frequent landslides that blocked the paths or washed them away. This not only slowed down the movement of the troops but also hindered the essential supply for the outpost soldiers.

The other hitch of the Indian troops in NEFA, aside from poor clothing, was that they had not been acclimatised to the high altitude and cold weather of the Himalayan border. Some of the outposts were at altitudes of between 14,000 feet and 16,000 feet with low air pressure.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the topography of the region is that there isn't much flat ground as about 90 percent of the territory is mostly mountainous with difficult terrain, spiky ridges, and deep gorges. In addition, the Indian Army's readiness for alpine warfare, technical training, and total strength of the armed forces were altogether quite a different stories.<sup>36</sup> They were trained mostly for plain warfare. Moreover, supplying rations and ammunition to those outposts in the mountains took days through difficult terrain.<sup>37</sup> However, these disadvantages or weaknesses never demoralised the Indian troops. During the war, the Indian troops fought fiercely against overwhelming odds.<sup>38</sup> It resisted the intruding Chinese force for hours, inflicting heavy casualties. In many instances, the Indian troops [allegedly] attacked the enemy with bayonets, engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.<sup>39</sup>

33 Leo E. Rose and Margaret W. Fisher, *The North-East Frontier Agency of India*, Institute of International Studies, (Berkeley: University of California, 1967): 9.

34 Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, (New Delhi: Omsons Publication., 1988):52.

35 Dwivedi and Sandhu, "The Unknown Battles".

36 Calvin, (1984); Dalve (1969); see also Lintiner (2018).

37 The average height of the mountain peaks in this region ranges from 1829 metres to well over 7089 metres near the frontier border in the northern reaches. The terrain feature is characterised with spiky ridges, and deep gorges.

38 Calvin, "The China-India Border War", 42-50.

39 M. Panging Pao, "Heroes of Battle of Walong in 1962 Sino-India war: 6 Kumaon," *The Arunachal Times*, November 22, 2020. Accessed September 28, 2021, <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2020/11/22/heroes-of-battle-of-walong-in-1962-sino-india-war-6-kumaon/>

In late October 1962, the Chinese troops were reinforced with superior forces and launched a second wave of attacks eastward. They adopted a multi-pronged strategy, attacking from three directions supported by heavy artillery, which compelled India to retreat. In the course of the war, India lost various strategic outposts in four administrative divisions of NEFA, except the Tirap frontier division. The war ended after a month-long battle on November 20, 1962, when China unilaterally declared a ceasefire. It withdrew its troops in 1963 from NEFA but continued to occupy Aksai Chin in the western sector.

### *The 1962 War and Civilian War efforts*

During war, every citizen relentlessly fought on the home front while soldiers fought on the borders. As a matter of fact, 'modern wars are not fought on the borders alone. The home front is also equally important.'<sup>40</sup> During war, on the domestic front, civilians are an integral part of the fight to defend their nation from invaders. The farmers, workers, and employees of factories, as well as men and women, extended help to the war effort by making supplies and weapons for front-line soldiers. They performed their tasks to their maximum capacity. These selfless civilian actions during the war served to strengthen morale among civilians and military alike and to unite domestic citizens. This spirit of unity for a common purpose among the citizens may be difficult to comprehend today, but it was real.

**D**uring the 1962 India-China war, the Indian civilians showed this unity and determination to overthrow the invaders. With this determination, they inexorably work in fields and factories in order to provide an effective supply line with regard to food, clothing, and other necessities for soldiers on the borders. Furthermore, the civilians had accepted the other challenges of the war on the home front, such as being restricted to the absolute essentials when it came to supplies required by the military during the war. This ensures that materials needed for the war effort are available. The general population prevented the rising price of commodities, black marketeers, and spread of rumour. Besides, they supported the government and its schemes to intensify agricultural and industrial production within the country. One such

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40 Shri Shriman Narayan, "On the Home Front," *Akashvani* (Formerly the Indian Listeners), Programme Journal of All India Radio, XXVII. no. 56, (January 27, 1963):1-2.

scheme was growing fruits and vegetables in the states of Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar to meet the needs of the army in the eastern sector under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. The people extended their cooperation fully to the national effort.

Moreover, when the government urged people to donate money, especially gold, to the defence fund, the public responded with great excitement. Thus, they contributed to the war effort by donating gold and cash to the recently founded National Defence Fund, investing in National Defence Certificates, or buying National Defence Bonds. Gold is the only commodity that can be freely traded for any foreign currency. Subsequently, these currencies can be used to purchase the goods and services that are essential for soldiers and society as a whole.<sup>41</sup> Besides, civilians also overwhelmingly refrain from buying gold and hoarding it. The other war effort that the civilians contributed to was by donating blood and bandages to wounded soldiers, while women knit socks, mufflers, and pullovers for soldiers on the border, and others participated in civil defence training.<sup>42</sup>

### *The NEFA inhabitant's war efforts*

In the eastern sector, when the Indian troops retreated from the far north in the first wave of the Chinese attack, the inhabitants of NEFA started abandoning their villages and moving towards safer places, whereas others hid in the jungle. However, many villagers in different frontier divisions stayed back and supported or assisted the Indian Army in whatever way they could in defending the country from China's invasion. According to Guyot-Réchar, about 325,000 people refused to evacuate the premises during the conflict. She further wrote that the Apatanis of the Siang Frontier Division and the neighbouring Nyishis not only refused to evacuate but were also ready to fight back the invaders with their bows and arrows.<sup>43</sup> These kinds of stales are found in almost all the frontier divisions. There was an instance where villagers (like those of the Nyishis tribe)

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41 "Gold Bonds: A Token of Patriotism," Broadcast to Nation by the Union Finance Minister, Shri Morarji Desai, *Akashvani* (Formerly the Indian Listeners), Programme Journal of All India Radio, XXVII. no. 47, (November 25, 1962).

42 Dr. Rajendra Prasad, "Keep the Flame Steady," *Akashvani* (Formerly the Indian Listeners), Programme Journal of All India Radio, XXVII. no. 49, (December 9, 1962): 6.

43 Bérénice Guyot-Rechard, *Shadow States: India, China and Himalayas, 1910-1962*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 245.

came down to the foothills of the border areas of Assam (Charduar) 'only to put their women and children in safety before going back to defend their homes.'<sup>44</sup> The people of NEFA played critical roles while defending against Chinese aggression by supporting the Indian army and civil administration by working as porters, as a source of human intelligence, and as labourers for the construction of roads and airstrips, among other things.

**a) Worked as porters and conveyed supplies to Indian forward posts**

In his 1963 interview, Gen. S.P.P. Thorat spoke of the difficulties of maintaining communication in NEFA's mountainous terrain. He said, "there are no roads, which makes movement extremely difficult ...movement is laborious and very slow ....the supply of essential commodities to the forces on the front is a major task."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, N.K. Rustomji, the former advisor to the Governor of Assam, acknowledged the absence of development and the lack of roads and communication in NEFA during his talk on *All India Radio* in 1963. He said "Communications in this vast region had remained virtually undeveloped.... all travel to various parts of this frontier region was by foot along precarious mountain passes".<sup>46</sup>

In this terrain, porters were the only mode of transportation, besides air supply. With increasing political tension between India and China, new military outposts were built in the late 1950s in the Thangla Ridge area on the Indian side to counter the growing Chinese aggression. It is said that these outposts were small and scattered. The transportation of essential items and ammunition to these outposts and connectivity with the base camp were a major concerns. Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee writes about these issues with connectivity and transportation, as well as the difficult life that people lead, in his book *Alluring Frontiers*. He said that no vehicle ran beyond the great Brahmaputra River in the 1950s, and all approaches were made by air. The Indian Air Force and the private Kalinga Airways aircraft, like the "Dakotas" and "Otters," brought the much-

44 *Telegram* (1962)'APSA, P/90/62', as cited in BereniceGuyot-Réchar, (2017): 129.

45 Gen. S.P.P. Thorat, "China Sure to Lose", (interview), *Akashvani* (Formerly the Indian Listeners), Programme Journal of All India Radio, XXXIII. no. 21, (May 26, 1963): 3 & 60.

46 N.K. Rustomji, "People of NEFA: The Adis", *Assam Information* (Directorate of Information & Public Relations, Gauhati, Government of Assam), XIV. no. 12, (1963): 12 -15.

needed supplies, buildings, and relief materials from upper Assam's Mohanbari base to Pashigat's.<sup>47</sup> From Pashigat, local porters lifted the loads and ferried them to various destinations, or the Dakotas airdropped the supplies to these bases. But the air supplies had their own limitations at those heights, and the weather was uncertain. Sometimes airdrop supplies landed on the enemy's side or fell into deep ravines. In some cases, the Army hired local villagers to pullout or collect the air supplies scattered across the steep mountains.

The local inhabitants provided the much-required porters for the Indian Army to carry loads through this terrain to the forward line. According to John P. Dalvi, "the porters were the prime source of mobility for the Indian troops in this rugged, hilly terrain".<sup>48</sup> This allowed Indian troops to move to forward areas despite all these difficulties. Furthermore, the garrison's daily maintenance and logistic supplies were significantly dependent on the people's cooperation. 'It would be very difficult without the help of the locals,' Dalvi remarked. Undeniably, the Auxiliary Labour Corps (ALCs) and porters from local villagers (help) came in handy and useful. Guyot-Rechard describes this development and argues that "the local villagers had significantly contributed to the war effort".<sup>49</sup>

In the Kameng Frontier Division, the porters organised a 'porterage depot' at Lump, northwest of Tawang; from there, they ferried the supplies to the forward posts. There were instances where many of them got injured during the fighting. In the face of these formidable challenges, they continued to lift the munitions of war undaunted.<sup>50</sup> During the battle of Thembang, the villagers, including women and children, came forward and extended support to the Army to carry forward loads before the Army evacuated themselves from Bomdi La. Likewise, the Singchung villagers (of West Kameng) volunteered against all odds to carry food and ammunition for the soldiers using their mules.<sup>51</sup> It is said that they could not be dissuaded from their voluntary contribution to the war effort.<sup>52</sup>

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47 Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, (New Delhi: Omsons Publication., 1988): 19.

48 Dalve, *Himalayan Blunder*, 115.

49 Bérénice Guyot- Rechard, *Shadow States: India, China and Himalayas, 1910-1962*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 251.

50 Col. P.N. Luthra, "A Story of Undying Faith and Courage: NEFA People and the Chinese Invasion", *Akashvani* (Formerly the Indian Listeners), Programme Journal of All India Radio, April 7, XXVIII. no. 14, (1963): 1 and 60.

51 Oinam Sunil, "Bomdila's tales of war and bravery," *Times of India*, November 13, 2012.

52 Luthra, "A Story of Undying Faith and Courage," 1.

On the eastern side of the frontier (Lohit division) as well, villagers from Walla (Hawai circle of Anjaw district), Kamdi, Changung, Ngi, and Sung villages were engaged by the Indian Army as porters at the Walong front. They carried rations, guns, and ammunition to hilltop forward posts (like Namti, Dong, and Helmet Top) during the war.<sup>53</sup> Sangja Gompou, a porter from Namchi village (of Upper Subansiri), recounted that some of these forward posts are as high as 13000 to 15000 feet, and carrying 60 to 70 kg of supplies was not easy, but he and his fellow porters delivered the supplies to these places without any trouble.<sup>54</sup>

As the Indian troops moved into the far north to counter the advancing Chinese forces, more porters were required to increase the frequency of supplies. Subsequently, the civil administration mobilised hundreds of porters to carry provisions to those outposts. The local inhabitants of Yingkiong, Gete, Shimong, and other surrounding villages of the Siang Frontier Division responded positively and volunteered to carry supplies by head load on the mountain 'road, barely a foot track, badly torn, climbing up and down the hill'.<sup>55</sup> They carried supplies to forward posts' days and nights almost without a break.<sup>56</sup> They had ferried supplies to Indian pickets and other forward posts while Indian troops were busy fighting against invading Chinese troops. These contributions were hailed and commended by the then advisor to the Governor of Assam, N.K. Rustomji. He also praised the locals for accompanying Indian troops carrying ammunition to the front lines while under enemy fire and for sheltering wounded soldiers in their hour of need.<sup>57</sup>

### ***b) Information gathering and alerting the Indian troops***

The role of intelligence is vital during war as well as in times of peace for ensuring national security. Information pertaining to the enemy's location, strength of their unit, movement, equipment, and who exactly is guarding a

53 Utpal Boruah, "War survivor in Arunachal recalls haunting 1962 battle", *Outlook*, November 19, (2010). Accessed December 10, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com>

54 Madhu Gurung, "Memories of an unsung war", *The Hindu*, September 29, 2012. Accessed September 18, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/memories-of-an-unsung-ar/article3941699.ece>

55 Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, 303, 307.

56 Shukla and Shukla, "The 1962 war".

57 Rustomji, "People of NEFA," 15.

particular bridge or strongpoint has always been a huge advantage. Information about the battlefield and tactical and strategic intelligence is essential for armed forces during war.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the source of the information is, human intelligence (HUMINT), photographic and satellite intelligence (PHOINT and SATINT), and electronic and signal intelligence (ELINT and SIGINT) are very vital in modern warfare. Without any of these sources of information, any military force, no matter how advanced or well-trained, could be paralysed or rendered non-functional.

In this context, the local inhabitants of NEFA contributed significantly to the war effort by gathering information on enemy movements and locations. This secret information provided by the villagers came in handy for the Indian army when the military intelligence network in this frontier region failed to provide much-needed information due to a lack of preparedness, a communication gap, and inhospitable terrain.

The NEFA's people belonging to the Tibetan-Buddhist, Mishmi, and Tani tribes of the border villages, particularly in the north and northeast, know the terrain better than anyone else. These border tribes had crossed the border many times before the 1962 war for trade and hunting. Indeed, using their knowledge of the terrain and their skills, the residents of the Kameng and Dichu (present-day reserved forest areas) of Lohit district helped the Indian Army gather valuable information about location, movement, and strength of enemy troops. Using the advantages of their high-rise peaks and steep mountain slopes, they sneaked closer to the Chinese stronghold area undetected, watched over their troops' movements, and reported back to the Indian Army. China had also adopted a similar strategy, using indoctrinated Tibetans and Deng youth, much before the war.

Kaho (Kahao) is one such village in the Lohit Frontier Division (located in present-day Anjaw district) on the easternmost tip of India along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the India-China border. It is 10 km away from Kibithoo and 30 km away from Walong. According to the 1961 census, Kaho is a small village of the hunting Meyor tribe of Tibetan origin, with four households

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58 John A. Gentry, "Intelligence in War: How important is it? How do we know?", *Intelligence and National Security*, 34, no. 6, (May 13, 2019): 833- 850. Accessed December 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1611205>

and a total population of twenty-eight.<sup>59</sup> The number might be small, but their toughness and courage came in handy when it came to strategies for defending the country's territory, and their commitment deserves recognition. It is reported that the Meyor tribes of Kaho village also helped the Indian troops by gathering valuable information about Chinese movements. Besides, they also alerted the Army when they saw the Chinese moving towards their villages in October 1962 from a hilltop.<sup>60</sup> This enabled the troops to strategise their counterattack plan. With this kind of accurate information, the Indian troops were able to hold the Chinese forces at Walong (the Battle of Walong) for two weeks and inflict heavy casualties before retreating.

Similarly, the local Monpas of the Kameng Frontier Division also 'played a significant role in creating an effective network at the border', as Col. Ajai Shukla recounted in his seminar presentation delivered at the *Institute of Chinese Studies*, Delhi.<sup>61</sup> He further narrated the contribution of the Monpas of Tawang district, 'how they spent hours sitting at the border making sketches of Chinese camps to help Indian forces' (Ibid). They informed the Army about how the Chinese PLA had used the passes north of Taksang Gompa for crossing and re-crossing the border.<sup>62</sup> The significance of Monpas as a potential source of human intelligence and as porters in this mountainous terrain is highlighted in D.K. Palit's book, *War in the High Himalayas: The Indian Army in Crisis, 1962*. He argued that the Monpas could provide significant assistance in developing stronger defences for this region.

These were people whom the Indian government, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was trying to win over in order to consolidate Indian sovereignty over

59 L.B. Thanga, ed., *Census of India, 1961 North-East Frontier Agency*, (Part II-A: General population tables and NEFA special tables), Ministry of Home Affairs Office of the Registrar General, XXIV (1966): 232.

60 Abhishek Bhalla, "Tiny frontier village that helped Army in 1962 war", *DNA*, April 8, 2018. Accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-tiny-frontier-village-that-helped-army-in-1962-war-2602174>

61 Col. Ajai Shukla (Retd.), "The 1962 war in Tawang: A view from the ground", *Institute of Chinese Studies*, (Seminar Paper delivered at Delhi, July 25, 2018). Accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.icsin.org/activity/show/the-1962-war-in-tawang-a-view-from-the-ground>

62 D. K. Palit, *War in High Himalayas: The Indian Army in Crisis, 1962*, (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991).

NEFA. During their occupation until January 1963, the Chinese tried their best to win the hearts and minds of the Monpas of Tawang, but the Monpas refused to cooperate with them.<sup>63</sup> The same Monpas extended a warm welcome to the Indian civil authorities, who had literally abandoned them during the 1962 war, to re-establish the civil administration and consolidate the territorial sovereignty of the country after the war.

### **c) Construction of roads, airfields, garrisons**

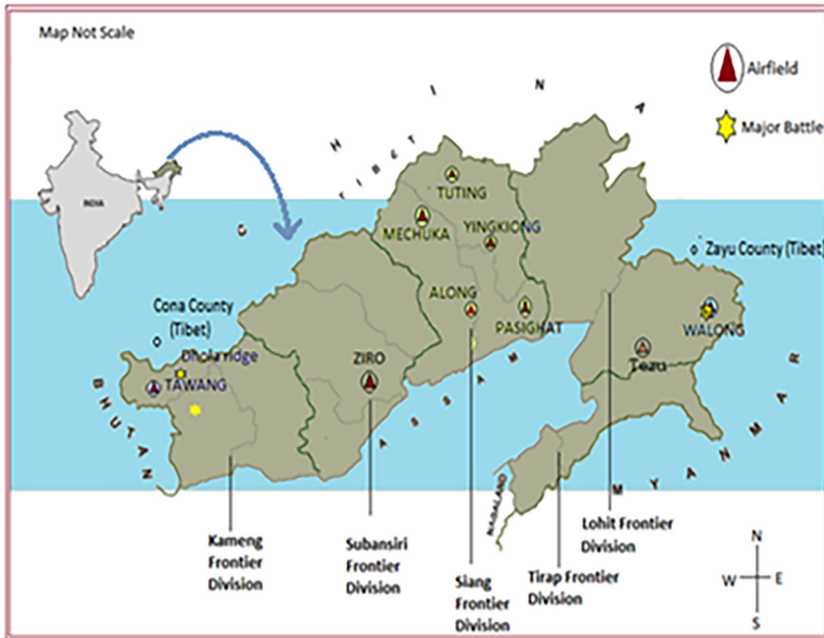
The villagers of these frontier regions also played many other significant roles, such as providing assistance in the construction of garrisons, roads, airfields and donated to the national defence fund when asked. Prior to the war, despite the cold weather and steep inclines and muddy and rugged hills, local inhabitants, including mule drivers, without any remuneration, contributed tirelessly to transport building materials for the construction of government bungalows and barracks for troops.<sup>64</sup> In addition, many villagers provided their community land<sup>65</sup> to construct bases, roads, bridges, bunkers, barracks, and other military installations. Whenever the civil administration requested or asked for support in clearing the jungle for the construction of roads, bridges, and airfields, hundreds of people responded and came out to work with their own pickaxes, shovels, and spades. In some cases, the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) supplied the necessary equipment and technical expertise, while the villagers supplied the labour on payment basis. As a result, by the end of the first Five-Year Plan (1951- 1956), a total of 3459 miles of road (including all-weather roads and mule and porter tracks) were constructed.<sup>66</sup> After 1960, the responsibility of the construction of major roads was given to the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), but it continued to depend on locals in difficult terrains until the third Five-Year Plan (1961-1966).

63 Shukla, "The 1962 war in Tawang"; see Rechard, (2017).

64 Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, 25.

65 'In NEFA, much of the land is traditionally held on a corporate basis, it belong[s] to the village rather than to individuals', see Elwin, *A Philosophy of NEFA*, 16.

66 Leo E. Rose and Margaret W. Fisher, *The North- East Frontier Agency of India*, Institute of International Studies, (Berkeley: University of California, 1967): 40.

**Map 1: Some of the Improvised Airfields in NEFA (1950 - 1961)**

Source: Author

Furthermore, the local inhabitants were the major workforce behind the construction of various airfields and other dropping zones (DZs) across NEFA under the first and second Five-Year Plan. The construction of these airstrips and DZs was crucial to military outposts in the far north for air supply. These outposts were small and manned by Assam Rifles till 1961, but airdrops were the main supply line. These airfields were also a source of lifelines for civil administration in times of peace, as they were often cut off due to natural calamities.

By the end of 1961, 13 improvised airfields of varying capacities were constructed at different places. The Pasighat airfield, at 514 feet, was built after clearing a long strip of flat land. The Adi tribe of surrounding villages provided the labour. Similarly, an improvised airfield was constructed at Along (900 feet), Mariyang (3,106.96 feet), Tuting (4,070 feet), Mechuka (6,200 feet), Ziro (5,216 feet), Yingkiong (700 feet), Walong, Tezu, and others. In all these constructions, the local inhabitants were the major work force.<sup>67</sup>

The biggest problem was choosing the flat land in this mountainous terrain

<sup>67</sup> Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, 41.

with high peaks and deep ravines. In some places, the villagers had to move heavy boulders from riverbanks to pitch the runway and clear the jungle to extend the runway. In the third Five-Year Plan, the building of six more airstrips was proposed, designed to be fit for use year-round.<sup>68</sup> Essentially, many of these airfields were operational only during good weather conditions, though they were very significant given the difficulty of building roads in the hilly tracts.

#### ***d) Donated to the National Defence Fund***

As the 1962 war shook the nation, a tremendous wave of enthusiasm emerged to fight the Chinese aggression.<sup>69</sup> It is recorded that millions of people donated their gold jewellery and money to contribute to the war fund, while thousands of youth enlisted to join the Armed Forces.<sup>70</sup> In NEFA as well, the political officers and base superintendents were instructed to collect donations for the national defence fund. The local inhabitants responded promptly to the emotional appeal for a contribution to the nation. It is said that the surrounding villages of Shimong in East Siang alone contributed Rs. 7,000 in a single drive.<sup>71</sup>

Besides this, the local women volunteered and knitted clothes for the armed forces. This helped the Indian troops overcome the cold weather in inhospitable terrain and fight the Chinese.<sup>72</sup> It is alleged that Indian troops deployed in NEFA in 1961 were mostly in cotton uniforms, which could freeze them to death in winter without winter clothes.

#### ***e) Sheltering and attending the Wounded Soldiers***

By November 1962, Chinese troops had already advanced into various divisions of NEFA. The civil administration, except in Yingkiong, had evacuated and moved towards safer places in the foothills of the Assam border. But the

68 "NEFA's Third Plan", *Assam Information*, Directorate of Information & Public Relations, Gauhati, Government of Assam, XIV. no. 12, (1963): 33.

69 "An Appeal to the People", Chief Minister's broadcast on National Solidarity Day, *Assam Information*, Directorate of Information & Public Relations, Gauhati, Government of Assam, XVI. no. 3, (1964): 5-7.

70 "Chinese Aggression in NEFA", *Sainik Samachar*, March 3, 1963. Accessed December 21, 2021, <http://www.sainiksamachar.nic.in/englisharchives/2009/jan15-09/h54.html>

71 Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, 304.

72 Rechar, *Shadow States: India, China and Himalayas*.

majority of the local inhabitants stayed and continued to support the army. They sheltered and helped the retreating and wounded Indian soldiers in whatever way they could.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, in Upper Subansiri, the northern tribes like the 'Tagins', extended help to injured and retreating army personnel. Tagins are the same tribe, whom the national press media had characterised as bloodthirsty savages after the Achingmori incident in 1953.<sup>74</sup> In Yingkiong (in Siang Frontier Division), the civilian administration, led by the Base Superintendent, Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee, and his officials, kept the Indian flag flying and hosted a number of retreating soldiers and people from distant villages.

They, with civilians support, placed baskets full of fruits and food items at the roadside so that Indian soldiers could eat and avoid spending time and energy in search of food. Most of the retreating Indian troops had not eaten for days. In some cases, they were able to survive due to the rations left behind by villagers while evacuating their villages. The Government of India appreciated these efforts of the local administration and villagers. N.K. Rustomji, the advisor to the Governor of Assam, expressed his appreciation, which was published in the *Hindustan Times* on December 26, 1962.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, villagers in the Kameng Frontier Division provided shelter, food, and clothing to retreating and wounded Indian troops before escorting them to safer places, as well as aided Indian soldiers on their way down to the Tezpur plains.<sup>76</sup> When withdrawing from the Kameng Division, the Chinese troops used ambush tactics and attacked Indian forces. As a result, many Indian troops lost their lives, and others lost their track. Lt. Col. Brahmanand Awasthi and his troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> Rajput battalion fought to the last man standing when they were ambushed by the Chinese forces while withdrawing from Se La and Bomdi La.<sup>77</sup>

In this type of situation, there are several instances where the local inhabitants used the 'ethnic card' and their cultural proximity with some of the Chinese officers and coaxed, bribed, or pledged to save the retreating and wounded Indian troops. These actions directly or indirectly minimised casualties

73 Rustomji, "People of NEFA," 15; see also Luthra, (1963): 60.

74 Bérénice Guyot-Rechard, (2017): 251.

75 Bhattacharjee, *Alluring Frontiers*, 306.

76 Luthra, "A Story of Undying Faith and Courage," 60.

77 Gurung, "Memories of an unsung war".

and destruction. Utpal Boruah, in his article “War Survivor in Arunachal Recalls haunting 1962 battle”, narrated how a 76-year-old local Mishmi priest from Walla village (in Lohit Frontier Division), used his ethnicity to influence the commander of the Chinese army, who happened to be a Deng Mishmi tribesman from Tibet, and saved Indian troops at the warfront.<sup>78</sup>

### *Formation of Civil Defence Force in Assam’s border town*

**D**uring war, the rumour travels faster than light, and this posed a great challenge to the nations’ war effort. The news of the Indian Army retreating from Kameng and other frontier divisions had created a panic in the bordering town of Tezpur in Assam. It is hard to imagine the chaotic situation with wounded soldiers and people panicking to reach safer locations. However, while many people fled with their belongings, there were others who chose to stay and volunteered to help the wounded and retreating soldiers coming from the frontlines (as mentioned earlier). The youth got together, formed a Civil Defence Force with all the available equipment, and prepared to protect themselves if Chinese troops reached Tezpur.<sup>79</sup> Women also participated in these efforts and were trained to handle arms and ammunition. The elderly women in these communities worked day and night and knitted woolen socks, gloves, and sweaters for the soldiers. The local youth collected blankets and distributed them to retreating soldiers and fleeing people. In sum, despite the chaos and panic, the community in the region assisted in many instances, with guidance from local civil administration and the Indian Army, in the run-up to, during, and in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian border clash of 1962.

### *Conclusion*

It has been more than five decades since the 1962 war, but the tension between India and China over recognition of the border is still very volatile. There have been reports of intermittent Chinese intrusions into Indian territory and a subsequent increase in the number of standoffs in the western and eastern sectors.<sup>80</sup> It has been reported that China has recently mobilised a large number

78 Boruah, “War survivor in Arunachal recalls haunting 1962 battle”.

79 Ankush Saikia, “The Evacuation of Tezpur: A family recounts of the story of its flight during the India-China war of 1962”, *Hindustan Times*, August 21, 2017.

80 “Army raising 3 porters companies in Arunachal”, *The Hindu*, July 4, 2020.

of its troops and armaments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and other areas.<sup>81</sup>

On the one hand, this development not only requires greater vigilance but also points to the need for India to build up supplies and manpower in this Himalayan borderland. As a result, the Indian Army has started raising more porter companies in both the western and eastern sectors.<sup>82</sup> This would aid in filling the gap and meeting the needs of porters, for an uninterrupted supply of rations and ammunition. Mention could also be made of the military outposts and villages on the far-flung border of Arunachal Pradesh, which are yet to be connected with a proper motorable road. These outposts are still dependent on local porters and mule drivers for all kinds of supplies (ranging from arms and ammunition to food and medicine). For the villagers, Army's presence in the borderland (in the eastern sector) has become a source of income.

Today, the local inhabitants of the mountainous region of Arunachal Pradesh are still working in close cooperation with the Army to defend the border. The Indian military agencies continue to hire the local tribes from the border villages for information gathering and also as porters and guides.<sup>83</sup> The Mishmis of the Dibang region often visit the borders (close to the Line of Actual Control) and report back to the Army about the movement of Chinese troops and developments in the region. Despite their significant roles, there have been some unfortunate instances where innocent villagers are often branded as traitors if they are caught crossing the border while hunting and are suspected to be Chinese or spies. Yet, the villagers and inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh still remember the supreme sacrifice and valour of the Indian Army, and it has become part of folklore and never-ending discussion in Arunachal Pradesh. Currently, a number of shrines have been built to pay respect to and remember the gallantry

81 "China has mobilized a large number of troops and armaments along the LAC: Rajnath", *The Economic Times*, September 17, 2020. Accessed August 23, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com /news/defence/china-has-mobilized-a-large-number-of-troops-and-armaments-along-the-lac-rajnath/articleshow/78163087.cms>

82 "Army raising 3 porters companies in Arunachal", *The Hindu*, July 4, 2020; see also Sajid Ali and Sravasti Dasgupta, "Army holds porter recruitment rally in Leh amid LAC stand-off with China, Covid crisis", *The Print*, June 25, 2020. Accessed September 21, 2021, <https://theprint.in/defence/army-holds-porter-recruitment-rally-in-leh-amid-lac-stand-off-with-china-covid-crisis/448557/>

83 Aiyadurai and Lee, "Sino-Indian Border," 381.

of the Indian troops and brave unknown soldiers. Indeed, their contribution to the nation is unparalleled and incontestable.

Meanwhile, the contributions made by the unknown villagers and porters in the 1962 war effort seem forgotten. Nonetheless, the people's spirit and readiness to cooperate with the Indian Army to defend the country from foreign aggression have not yet diminished. They can still provide the first line of defence if the authorities organise, recruit, and train them for the Territorial Army. The local inhabitants know the place and the terrain, and they are more accustomed to it. As D.K. Palit points out, the local community should be involved in defence preparations and needs to reach out to tap their human resources. Undeniably, Arunachal Pradesh was of utmost strategic importance for the defence of the country and still is.<sup>84</sup> Thus, securing local participation and cooperation is essential not only for guarding Indian territory in this borderland from growing threats from China but also for tackling other non-traditional security threats.

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84 Palit, *War in High Himalayas*.