

2008

h-dipla

H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews

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Volume IX, No. 9 (2008)

10 May 2008

Parshotam Mehra. *Essays in Frontier History: India, China, and the Disputed Border.* New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, November 2006. 320 p., \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-19-568375-2.

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Review by Steven I. Levine, University of Montana

In 1962, Oxford University Press published *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers 1928-1958* by Owen Lattimore, the pioneering scholar of Central Asian history and politics. Professor Parshotam Mehra, retired from the History and Central Asian Departments of Panjab University in Chandigarh, studied under Lattimore at Johns Hopkins University until the American anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s claimed Lattimore as one of its victims. It is reasonable to suppose that Professor Mehra envisioned the book under review, dedicated to the memory of Owen Lattimore, as a kind of coda to his own lengthy scholarly career devoted to the study of India's frontiers.

The book, consisting of eleven essays arranged in three sections: (1) The Background, (2) India and Her Neighbors, and (3) India and China:

1962 and After, covers a span of fifty years, from 1956 to 2005, but the topical rather than chronological arrangement of the essays makes it difficult to get a sense of the development of Professor Mehra's thinking on the issues he addresses. Let us, therefore, deal with several of his main themes instead.

First, however, it should be noted that the tone of these studies is judicious and reasonable. Although he is not averse to delivering pointed judgments, he is neither confrontational nor

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polemical even when exploring issues that aroused, and indeed continue to arouse, considerable passion in India and neighboring countries, in particular China. Mehra is an historian, not a scribbler in the service of politicians, and he grounds his work in careful analysis of the documentary record, of persons and personalities, and in acute awareness of the prevailing international norms and conditions of different historical periods. At the same time, his scholarship is rooted in a classical geostrategic approach to frontier issues reflecting, *inter alia*, the politics of the Great Game between the British and Russian empires in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first of Mehra's great themes is the importance of historical understanding if one is to grasp correctly contemporary frontier problems. Thus, in writing about the much-disputed India-China border, he examines a variety of English-language documentary materials including treaties, maps, diaries, and diplomatic reports, primarily from the British Foreign Office, and concludes with reference to the McMahon line that the Indians claimed and the Chinese rejected as their eastern border that, "the evidence at hand... makes out the Indian presentation to be far superior to its Chinese counterpart... the Chinese claim has no historical validity...they were never physically present on this frontier." (p. 31) (Incidentally, the absence of maps in a book of this sort is unfortunate, to say the least.) Yet, instead of engaging in jingoist rhetoric, in this 1982 essay Mehra calls for mutual efforts to break the existing deadlock and "reach a mutually satisfactory settlement with Deng's China." (p. 35) Here and elsewhere, Mehra sees history as a way to understand how present geopolitical conflicts arose rather than as an arsenal from which to muster diplomatic arguments. Whatever the facts of history may be, they cannot prescribe particular solutions to frontier conflicts that are rooted in contemporary geostrategic and other concerns and that must be settled through negotiations between reasonable parties.

Mehra traces Sino-Indian frontier problems back to the imperial past, in particular to the Qing dynasty and the British Raj. The latter was much more concerned with the perceived threat of Russian encroachment southward from the tsar's recently acquired possessions in Central Asia than from the Qing dynasty whose grip on China was weakening by the mid-19th century after its own earlier imperial aggrandizement in Tibet and the Northwest frontier territories. Mehra argues that the logic of creating inner and outer buffers against Tsarist Russia led British officials to tolerate, even encourage China to expand into Turkistan which became the Chinese province of Xinjiang in 1882, and into Ladakh as well. The British "gifted away to the Raj's Chinese neighbors" territory to which they had legitimate, historically-grounded claims because of their desire to use China as a buffer against Russia. (p. 54) British India's inner buffers were Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal, territories whose foreign and defense policies independent India also insisted on controlling. Mehra's 1968 essay on "India's Land Frontiers: The Role of the Buffer" is an essay that sustains one's interest even today.

With respect to Tibet, Mehra argues persuasively that its historical status, which changed over time, can be understood only in the context of Asian empires rather than modern international system categories. He is equally skeptical of both Tibetan independence claims and Chinese assertions that Tibet was always an integral part of a sovereign China. His assessment of the Dalai Lama as "an enlightened and charismatic leader of his people

with no overt hostility toward China,” a judgment rendered in 1994, is even more apropos today when Beijing’s leaders are reviling the exiled Tibetan leader in the crudest gutter language imaginable.

The Sino-Indian border war of 1962, of course, was a watershed event that destroyed Nehru, catalyzed India into becoming a major military power, and added to the chorus of those who labeled China an aggressor state. Looking back after forty years, Mehra says that the Chinese miscalculated by attacking India, and succeeded only in gaining a much more powerful adversary than the one they briefly humiliated in their month-long attack in October-November 1962. He is mildly critical of Nehru for not having taken proper measures to strengthen India even after he became aware of Beijing’s hostile intentions toward India, and not anticipating a full-scale Chinese attack in response to India’s forward policy along the disputed frontiers. Yet, Mehra admires Nehru as a man who strived mightily for amity and good neighborly relations with China. This, ultimately, is the position that Mehra himself adopts as a stance more than a policy prescription for addressing unresolved frontier and other problems in the relationship between the two “natural competitors” of India and China.

In sum, reading these essays is a leisurely journey through late imperial and modern frontier history escorted by a knowledgeable, beneficent, and Old School guide with no axes to grind and no politicized version of history that he insists on impressing upon his readers.

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