The essays collected in this unique volume by Professor Mehra were written over a span of half a century and provide interesting and insightful descriptions and analyses of the history and the complexities characterizing the interactions and relationships between India, Tibet and China over the past hundred years. Several themes run throughout the book as the author contemplates pragmatic approaches to some of the most intractable problems as well as seeks to reflect and capture the past that remains so much part of the present. As a political scientist I find the book a fascinating read, especially many of the detailed descriptions and discussions of the historical events that continue to cast a shadow over the present and force policy makers to come to grips with what they inherit from the past.

The major theme of the book is the territorial dispute between China and India. Historians have long debated the origins of such dispute and in particular the conspicuous absence of well defined and demarcated boundaries between the two Asian nations, while for most other countries, geographical features such as mountain ranges, maritime median lines, and what not, serve as boundary demarcations. Some types of administrative controls
typically would serve as the point of departure for negotiation, agreement, delimitation, and demarcation of international boundaries. Not in the case of the Sino-Indian boundary where for centuries people from both sides, including Indian pilgrims, Tibetan nomads, and British surveyors roamed the vastness and barrenness of the Himalayan landmass.

The British attempt to define the boundary has its origins in the ill-fated 1914 Simla conference where the three plenipotentiaries represented British India, Tibet, and the newly established but feeble Republican China. The Simla meeting itself is often associated with the (in)famous McMahon Line, the line that remains controversial even to this date. Ironically, the ill-defined boundary between British India and Tibet/China, and the attempts at Simla to come to grips with it generated more confusion and controversies. Apparently there were no solid bases from both sides as far as evidence regarding claims to territories is concerned. Indeed, as the author would admit, “one may accept without qualification that there are gaps in New Delhi’s case on the border, but it should also be conceded that the Chinese case is much more tenuous.” (30-31)

For understandable reasons, the central government in Beijing, however feeble and weak it was, refused to accept the conclusion of the Simla conference. The Chinese have always contested the legitimacy of the McMahon Line and continued to assert their claims to the eastern section of the Sino-Indian border, the North East Frontier Area (NEFA), where Arunachal Pradesh is now located, with a disputed territory of over 90,000 square kilometers. Not surprisingly, Beijing often accuses India—and this the author readily acknowledges—of its inheritance of “the legacy of the British Empire whose policy of continuous and unabashed aggression on China’s frontiers was no secret” (33) But Mehra is equally concerned with the “aggrandizement and resultant expansion of China’s empire to its farthest known territorial limits” (33) and in particular to the western sector of Aksai Chin in the Ladakh region. The disputed western sector involves more than 38,000 square kilometers.

The precise boundary between British India and Tibet/China was never clearly defined nor was any attempt at its resolution successful. India gained independence in 1947 and two years later, the People’s Republic of China was established. What New Delhi thought was the settled border was contested by Beijing, which called for negotiations to resolve the issue. This leads to another major theme of the book: Nehru’s role in the border dispute and Sino-Indian relations in general. Here the author is sympathetic in as much as he laments Nehru’s approaches to handling the boundary issue. Clearly Nehru was more interested in developing a cooperative relationship with China, a country that was just as renowned for its civilization like India and one that shared many commonalities given their similar experiences—although to different degrees and perhaps of different nature—with the West. For Nehru, it was important to bring China into the community of nations if for no other reasons than the fact this was one with a huge population and was destined to have great influence at least in Asia. New Delhi became the second non-communist country to recognize the PRC and was persistent in its position regarding the latter’s seating in the United Nations and its Security Council. As the author notes, “the Indian Prime Minister worked tirelessly for amity—not enmity—towards India’s great neighbour” (169; emphasis in original).
Not that Nehru was completely unaware of the boundary issue; only that he considered it less of an issue, more so as he expected Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou to be grateful to and appreciative of what India was trying to do. Beijing to some extent reciprocated, to a certain degree, by not immediately calling New Delhi’s attention to the disputed territories. At least for the time being, the glow and euphoria of “Hindi-Chini bhai bhai” of the early 1950s concealed deep-rooted differences over the scope of the territorial dispute and the mechanisms for its resolution. In 1954 a major trade agreement was signed between the two countries and with it was born the now famous “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” also known as the Panchsheel.

While the 1954 agreement acknowledged and indeed granted India special treatment in the areas of India-Tibet trade, access to Tibet by Indian pilgrims, and the establishment of Indian trade agencies in Tibet, New Delhi also had to give up some of the previously held privileges. However, the short-lived honeymoon was soon over and overshadowed by growing differences on the boundary issue. The situation deteriorated rapidly after 1956 and the 1959 uprising in Tibet and the flight of the Dalai Lama to India only made matters worse. The efforts to resolve the dispute, including the reported offer by Zhou to have a comprehensive settlement by swapping Aksai Chin for the North East Frontier Area, were to no avail (172).

Having failed to reach any compromises with the Chinese on the disputed territories and obviously worried about what was seen as steady encroachment on Indian sovereignty with the construction of the Karakoram Highway and growing Chinese military presence close to the McMahon Line, New Delhi adopted the so-called “forward policy” to establish outposts in the disputed territories, some of which were even behind the Chinese military patrol stations. The skirmishes and sporadic flashes eventually led to a war in 1962, dealing India a major humiliating defeat. The author offered interesting observations of how Nehru was misled by his military advisors, in particular his defense minister Menon, who in turn misjudged and underestimated both the strength and the size of the Chinese border forces. But the Prime Minister himself had much to blame as well. His romanticized view of the need and the harmony of Asia’s two oldest civilizations and newly minted independent states working together toward peace blinded him to the realities of realpolitik and intense nature of competition between the two, territorial disputes being a key component.

A third theme of the book discusses the nature and status of Tibet’s place in between China and India. The author suggests that Tibet’s ties with China and India have always been complex and rarely clear-cut. For instance, the author observes that while Tibet's links with China go back more than a thousand years, the relationship was largely personal rather than one between the subordinate and the superior (108). The influences and contacts from the north, the Han, the Mongols, or the Manchus, came and went, sometimes through marriages while other times in the form of forced entry or outright invasions. The intensity of such ties ebbed and flowed with the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties. The author acknowledges that both Tibet and China can offer evidence to support their cases, with Lhasa claiming “a continuous central government from the seventh century onwards”
and China asserting that Tibet had always been an integral part of the mainland (113). He also cites examples of Tibet asserting and displaying independence by concluding international treaties with other countries such as Nepal, Outer Mongolia, and Great Britain (114).

Mehra also admits that “Tibet’s relationship with China defies any precise, clear-cut definition. It should be plain that the country never enjoyed ‘independence’ as the term is commonly understood.” (118) Indeed, “over the past few centuries,” continues the author, “every Chinese regime—be it Manchu, Republican or Nationalist—has staked a claim to, and sometimes actually exercised governmental and administrative authority at Lhasa” (113-114) But it was only the Communist Chinese government that was able to establish solid control over Tibet after the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) overwhelmed the Tibetan resistance and entered Lhasa in 1950. The “17-Point Agreement” was signed in 1951, granting Tibet autonomy and no change in the political system but establishing Beijing’s sovereignty over its defense and foreign affairs.

While the author alludes to the imposed administrative relationship between two unequal players with Tibet as the subordinate one being fitted into the larger family of the People’s Republic of China, he also highlights the cultural, religious, not to mention the geographic ties between India and Tibet, emphasizing the special nature of such ties and India’s influences over the latter. “To the average Tibetan,” claims the author, “India is the holy land to which he/she aspires to go one day on pilgrimage.” Indeed, so the author concludes, “in making what may be called their fabric of civilization, the Tibetans borrowed their impulses—in generous fashion—from India.” (109)

These special ties aside, what India is really interested in and worried about losing, has always been Tibet’s being a buffer between it and China. Here the author defines what buffers are and how they function, citing Lord Curzon: “We do want to occupy it, but we also cannot afford to see it occupied by our foes.” (88-89) If British India’s interest in Tibet’s role as a buffer was to fend off Russia’s encroachment as much as China’s, then India after independence continues to see Tibet in the same light. With Beijing effectively establishing control over Tibet after 1950, that buffer seemed to have lost and India suddenly found itself facing a China right on the border, which itself remains unsettled.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao once reportedly said that in the history of Sino-Indian relations, 99 percent of the time it has been cordial and friendly. What Prof. Mehra has focused on is that one percent that remains in the way of full and complete normalization between Asia’s two rising powers. The history of the late 19th century and the early 20th is complex, with multiple players and divergent perspectives, interests, priorities, and leverage of power. The envisioned solutions and adopted approaches also vary, and political barriers are high enough that no satisfactory resolution has been found even though there have been no shortage of efforts toward that end.

However, coming to terms with history is not easy, especially since there is more than one version of what transpired and even more numerous interpretations of the presumably same period and episode of history. This volume represents yet another step, one more...
addition to our accumulated but not necessarily identical understanding of a particular period of the past. I would only wish that the author had included an essay that reflects on if, how, and to what extent the passage of time and the availability of primary sources and new information has had any impact on his understanding and interpretation of the events recorded in over the past five decades, and if we are any closer to beginning the process leading to a final resolution of the disputed border.

But there is hope. By all accounts, Sino-Indian relations have improved significantly since the late 1980s when the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi made a historical visit to China. Today, leaders in Beijing and New Delhi characterize bilateral ties as a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity. Confidence building measures are now in place to maintain peace and tranquility in the border regions. Trade and investments are growing at a fast pace. The two countries also cooperate on a range of international issues from the global trade regime to environmental standards. Indeed, the world is fascinated with and stands awed by the phenomenal rise of China and India and the romanticized destiny of these two Asian giants that is pertinently captured in the term Chindia—the harmonious re-emergence of two ancient civilizations. However, the path to such harmony and amity will be rugged, as we are reminded by the stories contained in this volume.