

Marginalia

KAI FRIESE

A strange justice that is bounded by a river! Can anything be more ridiculous than that a man should have a right to kill me because he lives on the other side?

– Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Whoever by words written or spoken, or by signs, or by visible representations or otherwise, questions the territorial integrity of India in a manner which is, or is likely to be, prejudicial to the interests or safety or security of India, shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, or with a fine, or both.

– Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act (1961), Section 2

“There is nothing to see”, said the Police Superintendent. “*Pahaar hi pahaar hai* (Just mountains upon mountains)”. I was trying to persuade the man behind the unnecessary Ray-Bans to give me a ‘restricted area permit’: a passport to the border zone. “There are nothing but mountains in Sikkim”, I protested. “And I’ve already been to the Eastern District and the West. You don’t have a Southern District. I want to go north”.

It had been ten years since another uniformed man had refused me the same permit, but the Superintendent had no reason to deny my application. Or to grant it. Except that he could if he felt like it. “The road is broken. You should stay in Gangtok”. He savoured the moment. And then, fixing me with his impassive reflectors, he signed the permit. “You can visit Chungthang, and perhaps you will get to Lachung. But you cannot see Lachen or Yumthang”. It was an incantation to my ears. He scribbled a warning on my permit for good measure and handed it to me: ‘Photography is strictly prohibited beyond Toong Bridge’. A buzzer sounded. “Anyway, there’s nothing up there”, he said.

I was glad to leave Gangtok. Bus journeys had become the best tonic for the disappointments of hill stations and the purposelessness that overtakes summer holidays. There were the agreeable adversities of punctures and landslides and the easy companionship of snacks, cigarettes and minor incidents. On the road from the Southern District the entire bus had collapsed with mirth when a gangly Australian who had been

demanding his seat was silenced by a local woman who grabbed him by the balls. “You are a very naughty lady”, he had gasped when he regained his composure. But there were no foreigners on this bus. And, as we meandered through the dark foliage of cardamom plantations, a couple of soldiers whined about their posting in this “third-class place”.

Chungthang, when we got there, was a thoroughly third-class hamlet – a gash in the wilderness, a sandpit in the forest. Set in a triangular hollow at the confluence of the Lachen and Lachung streams, it was a loitering place, fattened on the attentions of the armed forces. Untidy soldiers roamed around in their brown plimsolls, Bihari labourers toyed with piles of sand and gravel and every local seemed to have a government sinecure or a small establishment, or both. Tourists were still accidental here, but after a few enquiries I rented a room from a Tibetan matriarch who eyed me apprehensively and warned that I could expect only *sada khana* (plain food). “So what’s there to see in Chungthang?” I asked, making small talk with her daughter. “Video”, she replied, giggling.

Later that night I swayed out of the kitchen and into the darkened town with a belly full of cabbage and warm millet beer. The roar of two rivers filled the street. And looking up I saw that I was under a different sky, a boundless reach of trespassing border stars.

Borderlands are the most imaginary of all territories; but then, people are imaginative. India as we know it shares borders with six other states. Or seven, if you believe in Tibet. Ten, if you count the Eight Degree Channel, the Palk Straits and the Great Channel that separate Indian archipelagos from the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Sumatra respectively. And eleven, if you accept India’s wishful image of an undivided Kashmir that stretches up to the Pamir Panhandle, an Afghan territory created to avert the spectre of a Russo-British frontier in Asia.

That’s another story. This one begins with an inaccurate map, an image of India gleaned from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It was 1972, and the Britannica, which by now was really American, was still using a map of South Asia depicting an India flanked by ‘W. PAKISTAN’ and ‘E. PAKISTAN’. But the map had passed through Indian border controls, it had passed through customs, and it bore their stamps. E. Pakistan had been obliterated by three hysterical impressions of red ink and rubber, and they said BANGLADESH BANGLADESH BANGLADESH. They had a point.

This map had been lovingly mutilated. Slammed, with some precision, between the Indo-Gangetic plain and its mountainous circumflex was the bureaucracy’s damning conclusion: “The external boundaries of India as depicted in the map are neither correct nor authentic”. The red stamp had then bounced its way across the title pages of 23 volumes. All the way from A-Anstey to Vietnam-Zworykin. On the map itself there was a swathe of black ink that leapt from the Arabian Sea to the crest of Kashmir. It resumed its course in Volume 12 where six paragraphs of text, the introduction to ‘India’, had been similarly inked out, line by line.

I always hoped that the ink would gradually fade or flake off. And I returned to my parents’ bookshelf over the years to check on time’s progress. The shelves began to sag, the Encyclopaedia lost its luxurious aroma and the spine of the atlas had to be taped down. But the black ink still gleams like a scab on the onionskin.

Looking at the typographic profusion of the old map today, I notice a minor detail. Up there between NEPAL and BHUTAN is the abbreviated but bold-faced, capitalised and sovereign **SIK**. This is neither correct nor authentic. Not any more. The Kingdom of Sikkim was erased from the international map in 1974 in a momentary fibrillation of the Indian border.

The tiny Himalayan kingdom never had a chance. It had been living quite literally on the edge, between Tibet, India, Nepal and Bhutan. The British had already swallowed half of it when, requiring a summer resort for their administrators, they annexed Darjeeling in 1836. In 1949, independent India enforced an agreement declaring the territory a 'Protectorate' – always an oxymoron in international relations. Meanwhile, Nepali settlers had been transforming the ethnic demography of this sparsely populated nation, and by the mid-20th century had established themselves as the majority community. The endgame was a classic drama between two men who despised each other: the King, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal, and his Vizier, the Kazi, Lhendup Dorji; their wives, the American Gyalmo, Hope Cooke and the Belgian Kazini, Elise, who detested each other; and that still-teething megalomaniac, Indira Gandhi, who had the measure of them all. In the end it was a simple act of the pen. The 36th Amendment of the Indian Constitution: "After Article 2 of the Constitution, the following shall be inserted, namely: 2A Sikkim..."

I still remember the *anschluss* with Sikkim as an extra-curricular lesson in local geography. My school lay in the heart of Chanakyapuri, Delhi's embassy district and a Disneyland of architectural follies. The blue onion domes of Pakistan, the council housing of the British High Commission, the stucco wedding cake of the Holy See, the vast forbidden city of the People's Republic of China and the affected modernism of vassal states like Poland and Canada. The story was that most of them had been designed by the same architect, but I knew that each compound was sovereign soil. "You're in Germany now", my father would tell me when I visited the building where he worked. In the summer of 1974 I watched the pretty red pagoda of the new Sikkimese embassy take shape, and I waited for the flag to be hoisted. But when the day came, it was too late. It was the familiar tricolour that went up.

I was 17 when I went to Sikkim for the first time. It was an unofficial rite of passage, a Walkabout of sorts. Before I left Delhi, my anxious mother had thrust a list of addresses on me: friends, relatives, friends of relatives, relatives of friends. It was a network that spanned the country and it became my primary objective to slip through it unseen. But when I got to Gangtok I was so depressed by the squalor of my green hotel room and its view of a sewage shaft, that I turned myself in. The address said 'Swastik Camp'. This was an enormous cantonment that covered a hillside on the outskirts of the town. They took me in immediately of course, and I passed a pleasant week in strangely familiar circumstances. It was a township of Quonset huts filled with North Indian army families nostalgic for the cities of the plains. Every inch of the hill had been covered with cement and stripes of paint in primary colours. There was sweet tea in steel glasses, *paranthas* and *anda bhujia* for breakfast. There were shrill dogs and sullen servants. Card parties, and conversation: "Do you know any new dances?" "Can you do Boston Bus Stop?" "Do you like Kraftwerk?" There was bemusement at my desire to travel. "What's to see there?" But at the end of the week

I was given an introduction to a senior officer who had the discretionary power to issue me an Inner Line Permit to travel north. He was avuncular and friendly, the familiar whisker-flexing type. But then, gazing at my passport, he asked the dread question: “‘Freeze’, eh? Where are you from?” I told him: “I’m from Delhi, my mother’s from Hyderabad, the surname is from my father, he’s German”. I had been through this set-piece countless times and this extended answer was calculated to limit the number of ancillary questions. Instead, the moustache contracted like a frightened caterpillar. “I’m sorry”, he said, “I can’t help you. You see, son, your loyalties might be suspect”.

I got the point. Black Ink. Red Stamp. Wham! Wham! Wham! And he was right. I became suspicious of loyalties. I acquired this dubious fascination with borders, with frontiers, with stepping on the cracks where *das betreten* is *verboten*. Well, the fatherland has always been fidgety at the edges. Maybe it is a German trait.

Deutschland! Deutschland! I can’t tell you how little it means to me. But I’m stuck with it, I guess. The name Friese, by the way, is geographically specific. Friesland being a well-worn national joke, the idiotic archipelago. We all make our own geographies, but not on maps of our own choosing.

There is a map I would choose. It’s called an Egocentric Map. This expressive term describes an antique but enduring cartographic technique known as the Azimuthal Equidistant Projection. It was developed by the Arab mathematician and traveller Al-biruni who visited India about a thousand years ago. And it’s still in use in aeronautical navigation. In an egocentric map one’s own location is represented as a point surrounded by the rest of the world. Imagine holding down your location on a globe and then unpeeling and stretching it out in a circle around that point. Distances from any point on the globe to the centre are accurately represented to scale but the map also has its own peculiar distortions. The antipode of your location, i.e., the point halfway round the earth from you, becomes the outer perimeter, the boundary of the map. On my egocentric map New Delhi would be surrounded by a circle representing its antipode, a point off the coast of Chile. Such a map has many virtues. It is useful; its distortions are obvious; it acknowledges other people’s maps, since every location demands its own egocentric projection. It’s a traveller’s map; it changes as you move. And it does give Delhi a pleasant maritime horizon.

But the city that surrounds me has a life of its own. It has risen and fallen more often than I can count. It expands and contracts “...and sometimes the Empire of Delhi was confined within the proper limits of the province of that name”, wrote James Rennell in his 1782 *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*. But like a hardy spore, like some monstrous microorganism, the city retains the code of its empires and their furthest boundaries.

The ‘Memoir of a Map’. I love that title, but it’s not quite what you might imagine. Rennel was the first Surveyor General of the East India Company’s possessions, and his crowning achievement was his ‘Map of Hindoostan’, covering four separate sheets, representing, it was said, an area one-and-a-half times the size of Europe. The accompanying *Memoir* was a convention of the time, an encyclopaedic treatise, not unlike the later Gazetteers of India, dealing with every possible aspect of colonial interest in the country. But Rennel was also given to idiosyncratic digressions, some of which do live up to the promise of the title. And

so the *Memoir* is something special, something between autocartography and cartobiography. His work records the superimposed selves of the cartographer, the city, the country, and the border.

Rennel was a geometrician in the original sense of the word. He measured his world – literally – personally supervising the use of a cumbersome chain-measure along a tract 900 miles long and 300 miles broad. And then he began to draw a country upon it. Not the enervated country of the Mughals. “I shall not attempt to trace the various fluctuations of boundary that took place in this empire”, he wrote in disgust. Instead he set out to “improve the geography” of the subcontinent with a sharp and unambiguous circumference of his own. In the process he gave a virtuoso demonstration of territorial expansion by cartographic sleight-of-hand. He begins with three powers: namely, the British, the Nabob of Arcot, and the Rajah of Travancore. Then with a flourish, he describes how these three powers are rendered as one on the map:

“Since the state of mutual protection and dependency subsisting between them, blend their respective territories into one mass, in the view of foreign politics...the common frontier of these confederated powers, should be considered as belonging to one state, and of course be distinguished by one common colour; if properly considered, they are a part of the great mass of territory, united under the description THE BRITISH POSSESSIONS AND ALLIANCES. Therefore, this mass of territory has its exterior frontier...marked by a continuous RED line...By this method the whole frontier appears in a geographical view, like that of a single state; which as we have said before, is virtually the case”.

The red line would describe many fluctuations of its own over the next 2000 years, most of them outwards, all of them bloody. When it reached Afghanistan in 1893 it became the Durand Line; where it lapped at Tibet it was the McMahon Line of 1914. Retreating through East and West Pakistan in 1947, it became the Radcliffe Line. To this day, desiccated stretches writhe redly through the snows of Kashmir, Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The ‘Cease Fire Line’, the ‘Line of Control’, the ‘Line of Actual Control’, the ‘Zero Line’. About 10,000 crooked miles surrounding the Empire of Delhi.

The Egocentric map is for me an almost archetypal idea. But it has a necessary antipode of its own, which also has a somewhat archetypal appeal. I found such a map described in a book by the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr: “A patient of mine used to represent himself by drawing a circle expanding until it included the whole world, so that he and the whole world would finally be indistinguishable. He was a schizophrenic who was quite incompetent to deal with the world in fact”.¹

I recognise this impulse. I know this man. The schizophrenic lives in Delhi. And Berlin. He lives in Washington and Baghdad and all the great capitals of the world. A universal neighbour.

There was once a mad poet of territory, called Karl Haushofer. The ‘Father of Geopolitics’. A German, of course. In 1927 he wrote a book called *Grenzen (Borders)* in

which he speaks of the 'Organic State' born of a spiritual interaction between human beings and territory. It has 'Organic Frontiers' which are not mere lines but living, breathing bodies which have a dynamic of their own. For the Organic State must keep expanding its frontiers until they include the whole world. There's a whole typology of the frontier; and depending on the state of the State, it fluctuates between six types: the Frontier of Balance, Attack, Manoeuvre, Defence, Decay and (my personal favourite) Apathy.

Haushofer also developed the concept of *Lebensraum*, the 'Living Space' that a dynamic nation requires – in other words territory, a term originally coined in 1901 by his mentor, the Darwinist geographer Friedrich Ratzel. In 1924, Haushofer's student Rudolf Hess introduced him to a friend serving a term in Landsberg Prison, who was occupying himself by writing an autobiography. Understandably perhaps, he was interested in *Lebensraum* and he gratefully received a book by Ratzel. Perhaps it was then that the Führer crawled out of that prisoner's psychic carapace. Karl Haushofer didn't recognise him until it was too late. Haushofer had a Jewish wife – his loyalties were suspect – and he would finally wind up in Dachau. Maybe confinement was an ironic penalty for his vision of organic expansionism.

But the father of geo-politics also had a son, Albrecht, also a geographer. Albrecht Haushofer began to chart a slow spiral into the circles of opposition and resistance. In 1944, in the wake of the attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July, he was arrested and imprisoned in Berlin's Moabit Jail, charged with treason. His ultimate fate would be as absurd as it was tragic. But while he waited for death, shackled hand and foot, he began to write a cycle of poems. The *Moabiter Sonnetten* are terse but expansive meditations on the acceptance of fate and the joys of a life well-spent. Of travel, music, and a classical education. Of loyalty and guilt. One of them is about his father. It ends:

<i>Mein Vater hat das Siegel aufgebrochen.</i>	My father broke the seal.
<i>Den Hauch des Bösen hat er nicht gesehen.</i>	He did not see the rising breath of evil.
<i>Der Dämon ließ er in die Welt entwehn.</i>	He released the demon into the world.

Prisons are signs of civilisation. I should have guessed that there was a prison in Chungthang.

There's a well-turned piece of academese that can bounce through my brain as insistently as a bad song. It goes like this: "The phenomenological body of the traveller can sometimes be rather precisely located".² This often happens in picturesque moments of travel, but this one time it came on while I was perched on a Sikkimese commode. Which is to say I was squinting through the flaps of a stilted tent, trying to keep my focus on a flower in someone's window-box, and so keep my balance. Through the generous cut-away beneath, a pig peered up and grunted encouragement.

Having cast my link in the food chain, I stepped out into the backyard of my boarding house in Chungthang. It was a morning of chill sunlight, wood smoke and the slightly iridescent sky of the high Himalayas. A morning like glass. A breakfast of Nescafé and omelettes was promised. My phenomenological body was precisely where it wanted to be.

Havaladar Kartar Singh was in charge of the TCP or Transport Control Point at the junction of the roads from Lachen and Lachung. He plied me with tea; he complained about army life and boasted about how well he did out of it. His pillbox was emblazoned with the slogan "We Respect Those Who Respect the Law" but he did a tidy business in diverted rum rations and *chini* (sugar). He had some elaborate fiddle involving soldiers' allowances for tin trunks. I tried to steer the conversation to the topic that interested me: transport. Kartar Singh's eyes brightened, and he began recounting tales of 'one-tonners' and 'three-tonners', the army trucks that enlivened his routine by launching themselves off various mountainsides. But sure, he could get me a ride on one of the surviving vehicles to Lachen or Yumthang. He never asked about a permit.

My theory was that I was about to penetrate an Organic Frontier. I had already crossed the border of the border – the check post at Toong Bridge where a sentry had written 'Chhket' on my pass. But now I was in the belly of the border, and it was like another country. I could travel where I liked and no one would question my permit again. It was a Frontier of Apathy.

It had its own hazards, though. I was a prisoner of the *Havaladar's* torpor. It was getting towards noon and dozens of army transports had belched their way through the TCP, scuffing the day as they passed. But none that Kartar Singh deemed appropriate for me. Releasing myself, I wandered off and hired a sky-blue civilian jeep. "Yumthang", I told the driver confidently. He was nervous about this and said that he could go as far as Lachung. We would need to check with the *pradhan* there if I wanted to go further. "Fine", I said. A village headman was not a daunting obstacle.

Unfortunately the *pradhan* in question was drunk and belligerent. I had to track him down in the local shebeen, and he seemed so offended by this that he refused to address me directly. Averting his face he muttered imprecations I could not understand, to the considerable mirth of his drinking buddies. Returning to the jeep, my Bihari driver said it was hopeless. The locals were a high-handed lot and no one would help us now. But the situation was too absurd to surrender to, and I asked him to drive on till we were stopped.

Just outside Lachung we approached a barrier guarded by a pleasant-looking Gurkha. He came up to my window as we halted. "Hello", I said, explaining that I was a tourist all the way from Delhi, and that I wanted to see the hot springs in Yumthang. Yes, there was a permit – he studied it with solemn illiteracy. I glanced at the nameplate on his chest, 'Lance Naik Prem Bahadur'. Like a thousand *chowkidars* (watchmen) on the streets of Delhi. Raising the barrier, he saluted smartly, and we were off.

Of course I was exhilarated and a little smug as we swerved along the hairpin bends climbing to Yumthang. We drove along in silence and, I presumed, mutual admiration of my perseverance and cool deception. The scenery changed dramatically to thick forest, dappled with an unfamiliar autumnal blaze of reds and yellows. We zigzagged in and out of pockets of mist that seemed to be inching up the same route, but there wasn't another vehicle in sight. Here I was finally a trespasser, and I really had no idea what Yumthang was.

In the end, it turned out to be a big fat cloud hugging the road. The scenery had disappeared and the terrain levelled out when I asked the driver how much further Yumthang would be. He waved at the fog around us. I wanted to turn back, but he had a more

fastidious sense of destination and said we should at least visit the *garam pani*. We found it in a grimy building in the wilderness, where a family of herdsmen were enjoying a hot tub together. I saw a door marked 'VIP ROOM' and barged in, only to be knocked back by the sight and stench of great slabs of yak meat marinating in the steaming mineral water. So much for Yumthang.

We freewheeled much of the way back to Chungthang, which seemed somehow appropriate. The determined growl of the diesel gave way to the meditative song of the tyres. I was coasting too, still happy, but beginning to wonder why I'd made such a big deal of getting to Yumthang. The jeep had been an extravagance. Maybe the border was best left to the likes of Kartar Singh. Somewhere along the way I began to unravel a puzzling fragment of the *Havaladar's* chatter. He had been rambling on about illegal *chini*, and I wasn't really listening, presuming it was another one of his scams, pilfered sugar that sweetened Chungthang's tea. But he had said something about jail and he seemed to be talking about people, not commodities. "*Yahaan Chungthang mein koi Chini log jail mein hain kya?*" I asked the driver. Yes, he said matter-of-factly, there were Chinese prisoners in Chungthang Jail, they had been there for months.

I hopped off at the TCP where Kartar Singh still sat, and chatted for a while about the day's events. Then, at my casual best, I asked him about the Chinese prisoners. "They're right here, just down the road", he said. "You can meet them if you want. The Superintendent is a good friend of mine".

I did well to conceal my enthusiasm, but as we set off for the Jail I stopped to buy an extra pack of cigarettes, the universal currency of prisons, or so I thought. "You're not a journalist, are you?" asked Kartar Singh.

When we reached the signboard of Chungthang Central Gaol I was a little disconcerted to see the pleasant bungalow ahead. But the doors had thick metal bars, and in the courtyard I saw the silhouette of a guard cradling a sub-machine gun. He was watching over a group of young people on a garden bench. "Here they are", said the hearty *Havaladar*. "The Chinese prisoners!"

There were six of them. Four men and two women, all in their late twenties or early thirties. Their clothes were trendy, the men in bomber jackets and jeans and one of the women in black ski-pants. But her face was a mask of tragedy.

"Our Jat Regiment found them", said Kartar, patting one of the men proprietorially. The prisoner flinched. Eight of them had walked into a minefield. They didn't know it until two of the devices went off. "Her husband died and she wouldn't leave his side", he nodded at the sad one. "That's how they were caught. Anyway you can talk to them, I'll go see my friend". He took a couple of my cigarettes and wandered off.

I was at a loss. It was one of the worst introductions I'd ever endured, and my mind was reeling a little at the strange gentility of the scene. There were clothes flapping quietly on a line and the two women were clasping hands. It was a pleasant evening. In a garden. In jail. But there was an invisible line separating my fate from theirs. I wasn't in jail, not really. And someone had drawn a tight circle around each of them.

After a number of hesitant attempts we began a conversation, or at least an exchange of information. We had fragments of language in common; one of the men, their hapless

guide as it turned out, was a Tibetan who spoke a bizarre pidgin Hindi. He said he had lived in Darjeeling as a boy and then gone back to Tibet. He had agreed to lead the others, who were Han Chinese, to Calcutta where he had a contact, a lama who lived in Jagu Bazaar. I told them I was a journalist, and that perhaps I could help. By this time the men had relaxed enough to accept the cigarettes they had initially declined. I offered the packet to the women, who shrank away.

The guard looked thoroughly uncomfortable, fidgeting awkwardly with his gun. I offered him a cigarette, which he stiffly refused. The other men puffed away, still tense but now eager to talk in whispered snatches of English. It wasn't easy to follow. They were from a town I had never heard of, or perhaps never heard correctly pronounced. I tried taking down their names, but I couldn't even repeat them, and scribbled in a hopeless mixture of what was neither Pin Yin nor Wade-Giles. Giving up, I asked the Tibetan to try. He had just finished printing his name "Pempa Tsi Ring" when I heard someone address me angrily in English. "Why are you concerned with these people? They have violated the territorial integrity of India". I turned around to see a man in a safari suit and goggles. "They are spies", he hissed.

"And who are you?" I asked the spook. He was "just a citizen", but he ordered the guard to stop the prisoners from writing in my book. I snatched it back and started taking down the names again myself. They were calling out urgently now. "Chiang Yung Mei!" "Chu Shu Phan!" "Chu Yong Mei!" The guard began to protest, the safari suit tried to grab my notebook, and in the middle of this tumult, Kartar Singh rushed out along with the Jail Superintendent. "What are you doing?" he asked, looking around in panic. "We must leave now!" The guard began to lead the prisoners to the cells. As they passed, one of them grabbed my sleeve. "Please help us. If China, we die".

Kartar Singh was not a happy man as he rushed me away from the jail. "Why did you give them cigarettes?" he complained. "They could claim you poisoned them. Or you could be caught for passing them messages. Anything can happen. Didn't you see there was a CID man around?" It was getting dark now and he pointed me towards my boarding house. "You should leave Chungthang tomorrow", he warned, and marched off into the night.

I was not a happy man that night either. I was a stranger in a strange place where my loyalties would certainly be questioned by goggled spooks in safari suits. My triumph at Lachung, all the little deceptions of uniformed men that I had been savouring, now seemed like foolish liabilities. The recreational abstractions of my border hobby suddenly snapped back in concrete and paranoid terms. I could see the schizophrenic rearing up over Chungthang, poised as a pickaxe.

So early the next morning I left on the first jeep I could find. I scrambled over the landslide where the road was broken, caught another jeep, and finally boarded a Gangtok bus somewhere along the way. A couple of days later I was in Calcutta. I searched for a lama in Jagu Bazaar but found only puzzled faces. Back in Delhi, I took my story to a human rights organisation. They were earnest and patient. They heard me out with the slightly supercilious indulgence of professionals. These things happened, they said. The Tibetan would probably make it to Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama's government in exile had an understanding with the Indian authorities. But Han Chinese were generally 'pushed back'. Still, they were familiar with the inner workings of the state and the mysterious organs into

Roman Catholics form the largest single Christian group, especially on the western coast and in southern India. The many divisions among Protestants have been substantially reduced since independence as a result of mergers creating the Church of North India and the Church of South India. Many small fundamentalist sects, however, have maintained their independence. Converts to Christianity, especially since the mid-19th century, have come largely from the lower castes and tribal groups.

Buddhists living near the Tibetan border generally follow Tibetan Buddhism, sometimes designated as Vajrayana (Sanskrit: "Vehicle of the Thunderbolt"), while those living near the border with Myanmar adhere to the Theravada (Pali: "Way of the Elders"), also called Hinayana (Sanskrit: "Lesser Vehicle"). Neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra do not have a clear sectarian affiliation.

CASTE

In South Asia the caste system has been a dominating aspect of social organization for thousands of years. A caste, generally designated by the term *jati* ("birth"), refers to a strictly regulated social community into which one is born. Some *jitns* have occupational names, but the connection between caste and occupational specialization is limited. In general, a person is expected to marry someone within the same *jati*, follow a particular set of rules for proper behavior (in such matters as kinship, occupation, and diet), and interact with other *jitns* according to the group's position in the social hierarchy.

In India virtually all nontribal Hindus and many adherents to other faiths (even Muslims, for whom caste is the-

oretically *anathema*) recognize their membership in one of these hereditary social communities. Among Hindus, *jitns* are usually assigned to one of four large caste clusters, called *varnas*, each of which has a traditional social function: Brahmins (priests), at the top of the social hierarchy; and, in descending prestige, Kshatriyas (Kshatriyas; warriors), Vaishyas (Vaishyas; originally peasants, but later merchants), and Sudras (Sudras; serfs). The particular *varna* in which a *jati* is ranked depends in part on its relative level of "impurity," determined by the group's traditional contact with any of a number of "pollutants," including blood, menstrual flow, saliva, dung, leather, dirt, and hair. Intercaste restrictions were established to prevent the relative "purity" of a particular *jati* from being corrupted by the "pollution" of a lower caste.

A fifth group, the Panchamas (from Sanskrit, *panch*: "five"), theoretically were excluded from the system because their occupations and ways of life typically brought them in contact with such impurities. Formerly called the untouchables (because their touch, transmitting pollution, was avoided), they are now designated as Harijans ("Children of God," a term popularized by Mahatma Gandhi) and, officially, Scheduled Castes. Those in Scheduled Castes, collectively accounting for nearly one-sixth of India's total population, are generally landless and perform most of the agricultural labour, as well as a number of ritually polluting caste occupations (e.g., leatherwork, among the Chamars, the largest Scheduled Caste).

While inherently nonegalitarian, *jitns* provide Indians with social support and, at least in theory, a sense of having a secure and well-defined social and economic role. In

The four Hindu varnas



Population density of India

which such people disappeared. They would see what could be done. Discreet enquiries were made through various foreign missions – those far pavilions of Chanakyapuri. Finally, a few weeks later, a discreet assurance returned. The Chinese were all right. They could not be contacted, but they had ‘made it’. The Organic State had coughed them up. Or so it said.

One August morning last year I was flapping my way through the *Indian Express* backwards, as usual, when I noticed a story with the headline, “Centre asks Bihar about 2 Chinese POWs after drawing a blank in Delhi”. The details were tantalising: “The Union Ministry for Home Affairs has asked the Bihar Government for details about the two Chinese prisoners of war (POWs) – Jiang Chen and M. A. Siblong – who are languishing at the Central Institute of Psychiatry, a mental asylum, in Ranchi since the 1962 war”. After the *Indian Express* brought this to light this week, the ministry moved quickly so that “the matter can be taken up at a higher level”.

It was a follow-up story, and it had the tired air of a scoop foundering on the shoals of concerned officialdom. “A reply from the Bihar government is expected within a fortnight”, the correspondent warned. “And after that the Chinese Embassy is likely to take at least two months to respond to the Indian Government, it is pointed out”. End of story.

Two-and-a-half months of bureaucracy is a long time. Six months and more slipped away on my calendar and many things happened in my life, most which are of no interest to you. Except that I have been to the Kraepelin Ward of the Ranchi *pagalkhana* (madhouse) and I met a Chinese man there whose days have passed without event for a very long time.

After I read the story I called a friend at the *Express* who faxed me the original report. The headline read, “38 years after war, two Chinese prisoners wait for freedom”. The article was by one Manoj Prasad:

“Fifty-nine-year-old Jiang Chen sits in the portico of the library of Central Institute of Psychiatry, Asia’s oldest mental asylum. Memories of a war and forty years of silence are mirrored in his eyes. It has been a long wait, perhaps an endless one for him, a Chinese Prisoner of War (POW) of 1962. Jiang is one of the two Chinese prisoners of the 1962 war lodged in the mental asylum, considered hell even by Bihar standards, ignored by Beijing and New Delhi. Almost four decades and several summits and discussions after the war, these two remain prisoners of solitude and negligence.”

“Jiang Chen” had apparently recovered from a “mild attack of schizophrenia” in 1963. The year I was born. “M. A. Siblong”, the other prisoner, was 62 years old. An unnamed nurse was quoted, “Both of them behave gentlemanly and like rice, milk and biscuits... Since they don’t understand Hindi or English, we converse with them with symbols and gestures”. Siblong, the report added, “knows two Hindi words: *chai* and *biskoot*”. There was a photograph of a smiling man in a torn *kurta*, captioned, “Jiang in the asylum”.

I telephoned Manoj Prasad in Ranchi and he gave me the story behind the story. He had first heard of the Chinese POWs five or six years earlier in a local newspaper report. “It was

somewhere on the third page”, he said. “I asked Dr. Raju, the director of the asylum, about it. I said I had to meet them and take a photograph. He refused”.

Dr. Raju shot himself in 1997. Manoj waited. Nothing much was happening in Ranchi, and his editors in Delhi were after him to come up with one of those seasonal human interest/horror stories that flourish in Bihar. Then he remembered the Chinamen. “*Saala!* I have a story, I have to follow it up”. Fortunately he now had a new police contact – an SSP (Senior Superintendent of Police). He called him up: “Sir, I am a bona fide citizen of India, and I am accredited by the Government of Bihar as a bona fide journalist. I want to see this asylum where millions of rupees are being spent. Why can’t I see it?” The SSP said, “*Kaun bolta, hujoor? Jaiye na! Hum aapko le jayenge* (Who says you can’t, sir? I’ll take you)”.

And so, one fine morning, Manoj entered the Kraepelin Ward, where he quickly found the two *videshi* (foreign) gentlemen. But he was almost immediately set upon by a pair of doctors: “Who are you? How did you get in? Massive *hungama* (anarchy)...I was basically driven out!” Luckily, just before he reached the gate he spotted one of the Chinese men standing by the driveway. He got one picture and made his escape.

“He’s with me”, said the madhouse clerk to the madhouse guard as the sheet-metal gates whanged shut. Then he turned to me. “You’d better stick with me if you want to get out!” He wasn’t joking. If some doctor in the inner recesses of the asylum diagnosed me as delusional...well, he wasn’t joking.

The clerk was a friend of a friend of someone I had only spoken to on the phone. I had told him that I was a cousin of that someone. My name was Rana Guha, and I had come to see whether the Ranchi Mental Asylum – formerly the Central Institute of Psychiatry, and even more formerly the European Mental Asylum – would be a suitable home for my uncle, an elderly schizophrenic. I had lied. When the clerk said I should bring my uncle to ‘Outpatients’ for assessment, I made a scene. He quickly backed down and agreed to show me around.

Journalism is most enjoyable under false pretences. One of my first assignments, many years ago, was to find out whether kids were having sex in the juvenile ward of Delhi’s Tihar Jail. The Prison Superintendent, Kiran Bedi, was in the news again for refusing to allow the prisoners access to condoms. I got in by feigning wide-eyed admiration for her vision of the prison as an ‘ashram’ where the inmates’ favourite diversions were yoga and meditation. Satisfied, she sent me in for the guided tour. Inside, in the courtyard of the Kambli Ward, (next door to the Sachin Ward) the wardens swung their *lathis* and bashed the thronging delinquents back into their cells until I was left alone with a fifteen-year-old “model prisoner”. When I suggested to him that Madam should be handing out condoms, he was appalled. “*Yahaan koi bura kaam nahin karte hain* (No one does bad things here)”. He was inside for “Double Murder”, having stabbed his *bhabhi* (sister-in-law) and strangled his girlfriend. But he was not mad. He had killed those two women on a point of honour (*bhabhi* had insulted his mother, the girlfriend was untrustworthy).

Ranchi was different. As I set out for the asylum, a local journalist had told me to ask for ‘The Andamanese Prisoner’. “He killed 30 people!” Yet there was nothing threatening about the madmen. There were mostly grown men here, but little machismo. The wards

were named after dead psychiatrists rather than young cricketers. Ranchi was not as bleak as Tihar, but the place was much gloomier. Luxuriant trees darkened the main plaza. Beyond them I could just make out the veranda of the building I wanted to visit: the Kraepelin Ward. Emil Kraepelin was a German psychiatrist, a contemporary of Freud who played a major role in defining the categories of psychopathology. He had described the affliction 'dementia praecox' which was later refined and redesignated as schizophrenia. He had also described paramnesia, a condition that I found strangely appealing: artificial memories.

Staring at the Kraepelin Ward through the shady trees reminded me of something I had never seen. It had the menace of a plantation mansion in the American south. Or maybe it was just boarding school. I had felt that familiar thickening of atmosphere the moment I was inside the gates. Maybe that's the way it is with institutions of confinement. People here are immersed in consequences. They live in Effect. But Cause is sometimes forgotten. Some of them had been here so long that no one remembered why they were there anymore.

As the clerk led me through the grounds of the asylum, I realized that my cover was becoming a liability. I could see the Kraepelin Ward ahead of us, but my guide insisted on taking me to the Maudsley Ward instead. "They're all the same", he said. We walked down a corridor past a series of dormitories crammed with metal beds. Halfway down there was a cell with metal bars. "*Agar koi jyada shaitani karta hai* (If someone is very difficult)..." On our way out we passed through a cluster of inmates who seemed oblivious of my tour. My guide cheerfully pointed out the local characters. "This old man – he used to be the accountant for the institute. He worked here for 30 years and now he's an inmate!" No sign of the Andamanese serial killer, though.

I finally succeeded in steering our course towards the front of the Kraepelin Ward, and was almost immediately rewarded by the sight of the man I recognized from photographs as Jiang Chen. The patient looked to be in his sixties, and he was shuffling slowly along the veranda with a pronounced limp. He looked sad, which seemed sane enough, in the circumstances. Just as I was about to approach him, a doctor rushed over and the introductions began again. I trotted out the whole sad story of my debilitated uncle while the doctor shook his head. He suggested a private clinic outside Delhi. "Don't bring him here", he said, suddenly conspiratorial. "This place is...well, after all, it's just a government hospital".

By the time I stopped emoting about my imaginary uncle, my Chinaman had disappeared and my clerk was anxious to get me out again. As we strolled back to the gate, a madman overtook us, circled us twice in a tight orbit, and then spun off on his own trajectory. Somewhere past the gates, I came back to earth with the realisation that I hadn't accomplished a damn thing.

But I wasn't ready to admit it just yet. After all, I had travelled hundreds of miles to go sightseeing at an asylum, and I was feeling a bit defensive. When I got back to town I called my wife and related the day's events. "I saw him!" I concluded triumphantly. "You mean your trip is a disaster", she replied. After some sharp words, I hung up and decided it was time for more fibbing. I had a number for Dr. S. Haq Nizami, the director of the asylum, but all the local correspondents had told me I wouldn't get anything out of him. I called him up and said I was a journalist from Delhi working on an in-depth feature on the state of mental health

care. I had been to Agra, I had been to Shahadra, I would be going to Vellore – but Ranchi was, of course, the country's premier psychiatric institution. Could I have a look around? "I don't know", he replied. "We have had some bad experiences with the press recently".

"You mean that silly story about the Chinese!" I laughed. "I'm really not interested in that!"

He asked me to come see him the next morning.

So I did. We spent an hour chatting, and I played my part well. So did he. He seemed like a nice man who cared about his work. I listened with interest as he plied me with statistics. "In this country of a billion, in any given week, 10% of the population has depression. Syndromable, diagnosable, clinical depression. The lifetime incidence of depression is 55%".

I reminisced about my days as a health reporter. For good measure, I confided that I had a personal angle: You see, my uncle is a schizophrenic...

I waited for him to bring up the Chinese prisoners and feigned scepticism about the wild reports. He smiled.

"They are Chinese".

"Do they talk to anyone?" I asked. "Do they have friends?"

"They are burnt-out cases. Chronic schizophrenics. Friendship has no meaning for them. The only people who visit them are interpreters from the Intelligence Bureau".

"I'm surprised. I've heard so many crazy stories about this place that I don't believe any of them".

"What have you heard?"

I told him about 'The Andamanese Prisoner'. Dr. Haq was shocked. "There's no one like that here", he said.

"And then I heard that your predecessor shot himself".

"Oh, that's true", he said, mildly.

"Why?"

"Depression".

Dr. Nizami asked Dr. Akhtar, one of his colleagues, to show me around. This time I demanded the full tour. I saw the ECG labs, the lecture halls, corridors stacked with pathologists' specimens. Pale brains lurking in formalin. I asked to see the library where I'd heard the second Chinese prisoner (variously known as "Sam Long", "M. A. Siblong", and "Shih Lian") liked to spend the day. As we walked, a patient ran up to the doctor and started discussing his treatment. We were introduced. "He is a college lecturer in Calcutta", said Dr. Akhtar. "He is schizophrenic. He comes here whenever he has a relapse". The patient smiled and nodded vigorously.

"He has published a book in English – *kya naam hai?* (what's it titled)?"

"*Ché: Toward the Fount of Humanism*", said the patient. "*Do aur bhi hain* (There are two more)..." He smacked his forehead a few times. "Aaah! My symptom, my symptom...*kya bolte hain, Doctor sahib?* What's it called?"

"Amnesia", said Dr. Akhtar.

"*Haan* (Yes)! Amnesia!" Smack. "You are my friend, philosopher, and guide".

We went to the canteen in the overgrown plaza and I was introduced to an old Anglo-Indian woman. Her name was Maggie, and she had come here in 1946 when it was still the European Mental Asylum. She saw me taking notes and told me that her real name was Phyllis Teresa McNair. She spelled it out laboriously.

We went to the women's wards, but it was lunchtime and they were deserted. I saw a sign painted in English and it made me wince. "A Patient Who Works Recovers Fast". The old Dachau slogan: *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Rancho was no concentration camp, but the madness of institutions is universal. And so is the fragility of their victims.

We finally reached the Kraepelin Ward, and I was delighted to see Jiang Chen again at exactly the same spot. "This must be one of those Chinese prisoners", I said. "Yes, he is", said the doctor nervously. I asked if I could just say hello, and marched over. He was looking as melancholy as the day before, and I noticed that he had a bad rash over his face (seborrheic dermatitis, a doctor told me later).

I reached into my shirt pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. I was going to reveal my hand. "What's that?" asked Dr. Akhtar. It was a printout from a Chinese phrasebook website.

"Ni Hao!" I said shaking hands with the prisoner. He looked at me and nodded.

"I see you have come well prepared", said the doctor.

"Ni Gui Xing?" I continued.

"Jiang Chen", said Jiang Chen.

"Ni Sh Na Li Ren?" I asked. That one had taken a lot of practice.

"Chungking", he said.

"Chungking?"

"Chungking". He nodded.

And that was it. The doctor took my arm. "I think you should go", he said, as he led me away.

"It's very sad", said Mr. Lu Bing, the press officer at the Chinese embassy back in Delhi. "Very sad. After all, they are human beings. But we have no information. We have not been given access". He said he could only deal with the ministry of external affairs, but the matter was in the hands of the home ministry. So I said I would speak to the relevant joint secretary and get back to him. But Mr. Bing was feeling emotional. Before I could hang up, he made his entreaty: "You should write!"

"I will!" I promised.

"You should write: Indian restriction on Chinese goods is unfair! Is very wrong!"

I called the joint secretary at the home ministry many times, and one day, miraculously, I got through. "We are keen to resolve the matter", he told me. "If they are Chinese citizens, we will send them back. We have given every access".

"I've just spoken to the Chinese Embassy, and they say they have not yet had access. It's four months since the story broke".

"Yes, there have been procedural delays. As soon as we have information we will let you know".

"They've been in government institutions for nearly 40 years, so you must have information. I've just been there once and I know that one of them is from Chungking".

“Yes, well, according to our information they came to this country of their own free will”.
“Free will”.
I guess he meant they were seeking asylum.

On 23 April 1945, when the Russians were already within the perimeter of Berlin, Albrecht Haushofer was released by the prison authorities. He made it as far as the gates, where a band of Gestapo men seized him, marched him to an empty lot, and shot him through the nape of the neck. Three weeks later his body was found by his younger brother, his hand clutching the breast pocket which contained five sheets of paper inscribed with the 82 poems for which he is best remembered. Karl Haushofer survived Dachau and then took a walk in the woods and killed himself. Borders do strange things to bodies.

Sitting by my window in Delhi, I do what we all do. I watch my neighbours. The madman who rotates slowly on his spot by the roundabout. The arthritic Punjabi ladies doing their lurch. A parrot follows its path across the sky, trailing a cotton candy man on a cycle. The bird’s cries and the candy man’s bell syncopate as they vanish. The telephone rings. It’s a friend from Calcutta who went to Yumthang for the weekend recently. He tells me there are some nice hotels there. You can even find flush toilets in Chungthang. And my friend, the pig, has presumably been consumed by some other traveller’s phenomenological body.

I took a look at the current edition of the Britannica. It doesn’t have an atlas anymore, but the entry on India opens with a large map. And the censor got to it first. It’s black. A huge square of delicately textured brushstrokes. Strangely beautiful, entirely opaque. Borderline psychotic.

Postscript

In 2002 I learned from the Chinese embassy’s Press department that Jiang Chen and Shih Lian had been repatriated. Jiang Chen, I was told, was with relatives in Chongqing (Chungking).

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NOTES

1. Anthony Storr. *The Integrity of the Personality* (Pelican, 1960).
2. Victor Segalen. “A Poetics of Displacement”. In *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988, Cambridge).