

# Renaming as integration

Stories define the landscape in oral societies. Where landscape is named, each name expresses a meaning, and embeds a story. When names are changed, stories are forgotten, and histories are erased. This article draws on fieldwork conducted in Tawang and West Kameng districts of west Arunachal Pradesh (by Swargajyoti Gohain)<sup>1</sup> and West Siang district of central Arunachal Pradesh (by Kerstin Grothmann)<sup>2</sup> to show how militarization transforms landscape in the north-eastern border region of India. Physical settlement of military forces and renaming of local place names by the Indian army have symbolically and materially altered the local landscape in these regions. Unlike the majority of the population of Arunachal Pradesh, who follow various indigenous faiths, with a sizeable percentage among them being Christian converts, the inhabitants of the two regions discussed here are culturally Tibetan Buddhist, with a history of association with Tibet through trade, tax, and government.

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WEST KAMENG AND TAWANG on the western part of Arunachal Pradesh, traditionally known as Monyul, were part of the Tibetan state for nearly three centuries; the local Monpa communities paid taxes to the Tibetan state until 1951 when the postcolonial Indian government put an end to Tibetan taxation by establishing the first political offices in the area. The central part of Arunachal Pradesh, especially Mechukha, traditionally known as Pachakshiri, also has a significant Tibetan Buddhist presence as many of the Memba inhabitants migrated from Tibet in the early eighteenth century in search of a Tibetan promised land.

## The cave of the Gurus

For the Membas, *Pema Shelphug* [Lotus Crystal Cave] is one of the most important holy places in Mechukha valley. According to Memba oral tradition, Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, who propagated Buddhism in Tibet, once came to the valley and recognized its extraordinary qualities for providing refuge for the followers of Buddhist teachings. He concealed it to be discovered at a certain time in future by a preordained Buddhist master (Tertön). The valley became known as the 'Hidden Land of Pachakshiri'. For the Membas, Pema Shelphug cave is the place where this foundation myth of Pachakshiri is located. This cave connects the Membas with their past, and their homeland from which their ancestors once migrated, and where their belief system and moral

values originated. It is a symbolic representation of what constitutes Memba society and Memba identity.

The annual pilgrimage to the cave is a major event for the Buddhist Membas. Along the circumambulation path are several spots that are connected to Padmasambhava's sojourn in Pema Shelphug. The pilgrims stop at each site to present ritual offerings and prayers and then gather near the cave to enjoy the day with a picnic. Today, however, this cave has been re-invented as a retreat of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion. In February 2007, Grothmann reached Pema Shelphug, accompanied by a Lama, a religious expert who is also knowledgeable about Pachakshiri's religious history. They were welcomed by a signboard over the entrance gate to the cave that carried the Hindi words, 'Taposthan Shri Guru Nanak Devji' (Meditation place of the divine and venerable Guru Nanak). On climbing the hill, they came upon a small cement platform in front of a wooden shed that was wrapped in Tibetan prayer flags. In the middle of the enclosed space was a table and underneath, a signboard in English that said 'Taposthan Sahib – Shri Guru Nanak Devji'. In the centre of the table was a picture of Guru Nanak and to the right a smaller one depicting Guru Rinpoche. In front of these two images was a plate with incense sticks. The Lama wiped the dust from the table and re-arranged the picture of Guru Rinpoche, placing it more to the centre of the table, and then burned some incense and offered prayers.

Above:  
Military camp in western Arunachal Pradesh (photo by S. Gohain).

Below:  
Military depiction of the 1962 India-China war, Tawang War Memorial, May 2013 (photo by S. Gohain).

As Grothmann wondered aloud about Guru Nanak being worshipped here, the Lama replied shortly, and with an obvious expression of dissatisfaction, that the Sikhs from the Mechukha military base claim that their Guru once stayed here and therefore, they come to this holy place to worship him. Discouraging any further questions, he parted the curtain at the back of the cave to reveal rock imprints of Guru Rinpoche's and his consorts' heads.

The gradual takeover of the cave by the Sikhs began in 1986-87 when Colonel (retd.) Dr. Dalvinder Singh Grewal was posted as a Major at the army outpost in Mechukha. In an article first published in the *Sikh Review* in 1987,<sup>3</sup> which also appeared in different reworked versions in several other Sikh publications and on the internet, Grewal details how he came to know of the Guru's cave and how he forged out a plan to construct a proper place of worship there, including the establishment of a *Gurudwara* (place of worship for Sikhs) a short distance down the slope from the cave. As Grewal writes, the local people even agreed to donate land for the new structure; with their help and the support of the administration and the Indian Army and Air Force the work progressed quickly.

## Signboard battle

Two months after Grothmann's first visit, two signboards of almost the same size had been erected next to the entrance gate: a wooden plate reading 'Gurudwara Taposthan' and next to it, a yellow metal sign on which the Memba community welcomed all visitors to 'The holy place of the Lotus Crystal Cave', with the notification of the location written in Tibetan script below. The Lama accompanying Grothmann appeared quite proud of the sign and said that although they cannot expel the Sikhs from the cave, they, that is, the Membas, at least had a sign now that justified their claims to the cave. Six months later, the board announcing the Gurudwara was replaced by a green metal sign reading 'Shri Guru Granth Sahibji', and the signboard of the Memba community had been taken down.

In January 2008 again, the former green metal sign was repainted in yellow with the caption 'Shri Taposthan Shri Guru Nanak Dev' in Hindi and English. There was still no new signboard indicating that the cave is also a place of Buddhist veneration. In October 2009, all sides of the shed had been enclosed with planks, a door was affixed, and next to it, a board strategically placed to catch the visitor's attention announced in Hindi that Guru Maharaja once visited the place and hence it is a sacrosanct place. The picture of Guru Nanak was now placed in a shrine box decorated with artificial flower garlands and the image of Guru Rinpoche hung on the wall instead of its former place at the centre of the table. The only representation of the Buddhist community on the table was a picture of Tertön Chöwang Kunsang Dechen Rangdrol, who



was the last but one in a long line of Buddhist spiritual masters for the Membas of the valley. However, his picture too was later replaced by an image of Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the ten Sikh Gurus, so that in January 2013, there was hardly any evidence left of any Buddhist claims to the cave.

Colonel Grewal's euphoric account of close inter-cultural and interreligious cooperation between the Sikhs of the Indian Army and the Memba community during the construction of the 'Guru Nanak Taposthan' stands in contrast both to the Lama's murmur of disapproval and facial expressions, and to the 'signboard battle' to which Grothmann was witness. In taking territorial control of the cave and renaming it, the Sikhs of the Mechukha regiment privilege their worldview over that of the local Buddhist community. Yet, even though they have subordinated parts of local history, they were not able to completely silence it. The Membas still perform their annual pilgrimage to the cave, and in recent times, have started to promote their religious and cultural heritage to attract domestic and foreign tourists. In this context, it might be possible for the Membas to re-echo, to some extent, the powerful images and connotations connected with the Lotus Crystal Cave, and with that re-create the latter's history and preserve it for future generations.

**Bollywood at the border**

Gohain found similar politics of naming in Monyul, western Arunachal Pradesh. Monyul was a stage for the Sino-Indian war of 1962, when Chinese troops attacked several posts on the border, and overran Monyul for three months before they were called back. Monyul has been of particular strategic importance in the Sino-Indian border dispute, given that this region was ruled by Tibet for nearly three centuries following a 1680 edict by the Fifth Dalai Lama proclaiming Tibetan control of the land.<sup>4</sup> Monyul was divided into three tax posts from which taxes in the form of grains and yak butter or cheese were carried to Tibet, in relay form, and the local Monpa communities were subject to Tibetan jurisdiction. After 1962, with the military closure of borders, the Monpas were barred from crossing over to Tibet for trade or pilgrimage. The army has since occupied vast stretches of prime land and grazing pastures for use as cantonment areas and firing ranges. More significantly, the army has renamed local villages and natural landmarks on the grounds that the mostly Hindi-speaking soldiers are unable to pronounce Tibetan-based toponyms, so much so that the new army-given names have replaced older ones in postal addresses. In some cases, patriotic zeal combines with narratives from Bollywood, the Indian film industry, to create new legends of touristic appeal.

A case in point is the Zela Pass, a mountain pass that needs to be crossed in order to reach Tawang district, bordering Tibet, from the adjoining West Kameng district to its south. According to Tsering, headman of Senge village which directly overlooks the pass, Zela is a mountain god who resides on the pass; if the god hears noises, he causes rain to fall.<sup>5</sup> Zela now has been distorted to Sela, and while the name change was initiated by the British colonial rulers, it has acquired a new significance through a legend that soldiers are fond of telling. When Gohain travelled in 2006 to Tawang, she was served tea at a small shed by two friendly sentries who enthusiastically showed her the memorial built in the name of Jaswant Singh, the Indian soldier who singlehandedly battled with Chinese soldiers before being killed. The legend of the brave Jaswant Singh has been embellished today. In the soldiers' account, Jaswant was assisted in his valiant battle by two local girls



called Sela and Nura. The mountain pass where Sela gave her life is now named after her, and a second place, Nuranang, is named after Nura. This is a popular story and no one knows how it originated. Whether or not army officers would validate the new version, it still circulates – among tourists, taxi-drivers and lonely soldiers stationed in misty outposts who further help to circulate the story among fresh tourists. The old headman protests such acts of renaming, and yet, travellers from other parts of India are more impressed by the story of a possible romance between an Indian soldier and local girl than the story of an obscure mountain god. The new legend, not surprisingly, greatly resembles the plot of a classic Bollywood war film *Haqeeqat*, in which an Indian soldier, played by the dashing Dharmendra, stationed in Leh during the India-China war of 1962 is aided by a local girl, played by beautiful actress Priya who dies alongside him in battle.<sup>6</sup>

A second instance of Bollywood influence is the name change of lake Tshongatser. According to local memory, the lake was formed after an earthquake created a crater on land traditionally used as grazing pastures. It is now popularly known as Madhuri Lake, after top Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit shot for a Hindi film *Koyla* at the lake site in 1996. As local army men, taxi drivers and others serving the tourist business started referring to the lake as Madhuri Lake, the new name gradually took over.

Several people have objected to military renaming practices, spurred by the fiery speeches of Buddhist spiritual leader Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, who was a staunch advocate of Tibetan Buddhist cultural preservation in Monyul before his untimely death in April 2013. A few individuals and organizations have taken upon themselves the task of systematically compiling and documenting older place names, before they are lost in oblivion. Yet, army-given names proliferate. These names, which either recall military figures (for example, Jinda Pahar, literally translated as 'living hill', was apparently named after an army man called Jinda) or Hindu gods and goddesses (for example, Rama camp in Monyul or Hanuman camp in Mechukha) re-order space by transforming Monyul into a (north)Indian culture-scape.

**Contested stories**

For the sake of brevity and space, this article cannot touch on all dimensions of military renaming in Arunachal Pradesh. But it calls attention to renaming as a symbolic act of contestation over space. The contest over place-names or politics of toponymy may be compared with the politics of repatriation. Repatriation of material culture involves justifying rights over material heritage by tracing both membership in and lineage from the original, ancestral community, such as the Native American Graves Protection Act (NAGPRA) for Native Americans in North America.

Local assertions over places and place names may be considered as the repatriation claims of non-material culture or intangible heritage. If repatriation of material artefacts to native communities constitutes an answer, although partial, to material claims over space, what could the solution to military renaming of local places be?

Naming in the post-colony, more often than not, has been a political act. Naming and re-naming of public spots, institutions, monuments, streets or natural landmarks aid the project of nationalist memorialization by commemorating a political leader or event in national history. In India, as in several erstwhile colonies, place-names bear the imprint of colonial rule, and cities, in particular, abound with colonially given names. In many instances, these names were given to commemorate a foundational act. Victoria Memorial in Kolkata built in 1921 stands as a famous insignia of British rule in India even today. In postcolonial India, therefore, renaming formerly colonial place names with new ones is an act of contestation, whereby history is reclaimed from the colonizers by the previously colonized. A good example is Connaught Place in the heart of Delhi city, which was renamed in the 1990s by the then Congress government as 'Rajiv Gandhi Chowk' after Rajiv Gandhi, scion of the ruling Gandhi dynasty who was assassinated by a suicide bomber in Colombo, and who represented modern India.<sup>7</sup> The symbolism of names becomes obvious in this case. While Connaught Place calls to mind the colonial past, a bygone era, Rajiv Gandhi Chowk locates Delhi very centrally in an Indian modernity, and in the political now.

Renaming of border areas by the Indian army is similarly loaded with political symbolism. If military naming serves the purpose of nationalist integration, through claiming an area as continuous with the nation's cultural geography, or in the case of the Guru Nanak's cave, with the sacred geography of the Indian nation, resistance to renaming, such as the 'signboard battle' detailed by Grothmann or the documenting of older names, identified by Gohain, constitute opposite claims over space. In Mechukha and Monyul, people retain a strong territory based identity, where place-names call forth a collective identity, and prescribe a moral code for conduct.<sup>8</sup> Renaming breaks these metonymic connections between name and identity by cutting the thread of oral lore that linked them in people's minds. Elder people still remember the older stories today, but only few among the younger generation do.

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**References**

- 1 Fieldwork in Tawang and West Kameng was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, U.S.A. and Emory University, Atlanta, U.S.A. Due to restricted entry to this sensitive border region, conducting extended fieldwork here is not easy. Toni Huber (Humboldt University, Berlin) has conducted fieldwork on clan-based rituals and Bon religion in this region (Personal communication, January 2013).
- 2 Fieldwork data on the Memba of Mechukha was gathered during 2007-9 as part of the project 'Between Tibetanization and Tribalization: Towards a New Anthropology of Tibeto-Burman Speaking Highlanders in Arunachal Pradesh', directed by Toni Huber (Humboldt University, Berlin) and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.
- 3 Grewal, D.S. 1987. 'Guru Nanak Taposthan-Menchukha (Arunachal)', *Sikh Review* 35(407):45-47; see also, Grewal, D.S. 2009. 'The Sikh Lamas of Arunachal Pradesh', <http://tinyurl.com/sikhlama> (accessed 26 April 2013)
- 4 Aris, M. 1980. 'Notes on the History of the Monyul Corridor', in M. Aris & Aung San Suu Kyi (eds.) *Tibetan studies in Honor of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies*, Aris and Phillips Ltd, pp.9-20
- 5 Zela may also come from the word 'stiff' (ze), meaning stiff mountain pass. See, Tenpa, L. 2014. 'The Centenary of the McMahon Line (1914-2014) and the Status of Monyul until 1951-52,' *The Tibet Journal* 39(2):57-102
- 6 For a sociological analysis of the film *Haqeeqat*, see Uberoi, P. 2011. 'China in Bollywood', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45(3):315-342
- 7 Ahluwalia, B. 1996. 'Circle of Woes', *Outlook*, 29 May 1996. <http://tinyurl.com/circlewoes> (accessed 12 May 2012)
- 8 Basso, K. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press



Top: The two gurus: Guru Nanak (left) and Guru Rinpoche (right), April 2007 (photo by K. Grothmann).

Above: Signboard battle at Pema Shelphug, April 2007 (photo by K. Grothmann).

Below left: Poster of the war film *Haqeeqat*.