

SHIV NADAR
INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE DEEMED TO BE
UNIVERSITY
DELHI NCR

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR
HIMALAYAN
STUDIES

Issue Brief

No.29



February 2026

Indigenous Communities and the 1962 India-China War: Oral Histories from Arunachal Pradesh

Tadu Rimi



© Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence

About the Author: Dr. Tadu Rimi is a former Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies. A trained social worker and social scientist, she holds a doctorate from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and the Council for Social Development, Hyderabad. She specialises in tribal studies, oral history, and women's studies in Northeast India and was also a Post-Doctoral Fellow at The M.S. Merian - R. Tagore International Centre of Advanced Studies 'Metamorphoses of the Political' (ICAS:MP). Dr. Tadu has conducted extensive fieldwork across the region, including the audio and video documentation of oral histories, with a focus on community history, historical events from popular and local perspectives, and preserving indigenous knowledge systems.

Cite this publication as:

Tadu, Rimi. 2026. 'Indigenous Communities and the 1962 India-China War: Oral Histories from Arunachal Pradesh'. Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR. *Issue Brief*. No. 29. February.

[https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/Indigenous-Communities-and-the-1962-India-China-War-Oral-Histories-from-Arunachal Pradesh/](https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/Indigenous-Communities-and-the-1962-India-China-War-Oral-Histories-from-Arunachal-Pradesh/)

Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Budh Nagar District
Uttar Pradesh - 201314
INDIA
Ph: +91 120 7170100
E-Mail: chs.shss@snu.edu.in
Website: <https://chs.snu.edu.in>

Indigenous Communities and the 1962 India-China War: Oral Histories from Arunachal Pradesh

Tadu Rimi

Abstract

For the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh, the 1962 Sino-Indian War was not a distant national event but an intimate disruption of everyday life. When Chinese forces entered the region, Indian officials and non-local populations withdrew, leaving local communities to face occupation, fear, and uncertainty on their own. For a brief period, the absence of the Indian administration also meant a return to familiar rhythms of life, producing memories that are layered and often contradictory. Based on oral histories, this *Issue Brief* explores how these experiences are narrated under enduring conditions of suspicion, where expressions of national belonging are carefully and repeatedly asserted. Attending to these fragile and self-conscious narratives, the study foregrounds the emotional weight of remembering war from the margins and questions the adequacy of state-centred histories to capture borderland realities.

Keywords: indigenous oral history; 1962 India-China War; border communities; Arunachal Pradesh

The clashes between Indian and Chinese military forces in Aksai Chin that began in July 1962, turned into a full-blown war on 19 October on the Western Front. In the Eastern Front, the war began on 20 October and within four days, the Chinese army made inroads and took over the front for an entire month till it unilaterally declared a ceasefire on 21 November, and returned to its previous positions. For an entire month Arunachal Pradesh was under Chinese control with the Indian army, officials, staff, labourers and small businessmen, and all the non-indigenous population having fled the region. The indigenous communities were left behind to fend for themselves. Though it was a small period, there was a sense of uncertainty about what would come next, was more war around the corner? Would old Tibetan rule return? Or was it going to be Chinese rule? At the same time, there was also a strange sense of normalcy as the people were returning to their previous ways of life before the Indian administration had showed up a decade ago on their land.

A national event like the 1962 War is experienced and imagined differently in faraway parts of the country than in the borderlands; the way it transformed lives there is different. Most of the narratives about the War that exist are often based on the official accounts, military reports, intellectual discourses, writings by retired officials, stories by war veterans, foreign relations experts, and through emotionally charged popular media. The commemorations through establishment of war memorials, museums and tombs, dedicating awards, and the making of films and documentaries - etches only certain narratives into the public mind as if these are the only memories and realities that matter. They inadvertently erase and exclude the existence of the indigenous population living in these lands since time immemorial, upon whose land, villages, fields, forests, hills and homes the War was fought. There are no narratives that could provide alternative glimpses of the impacts of this national conflict on local communities. Therefore, this oral history documentation of the 1962 India-China War in Arunachal Pradesh is an effort to bring out the experiences of indigenous populations and to provide a more decentred perspective.

My field visits and interviews reveal unique stories. Those battlegrounds where bombs were shelled or soldiers lost their lives - were somebody's kitchen garden, agricultural fields or

pastoral land; a river from where people were fetching water or fishing, or people's forest where they forage, hunt or gather fire-wood. The paths used by armies were the traditional trade routes or village paths and hunting paths. People lost their village and the world around it, with no knowledge what the future held, or why their homeland was turned into a battleground.

How to Read Local Stories?

Post-War, indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh became subject of suspicion and were subjected to 'psychological warfare'. Even today, for people who had witnessed the War, their subjectivities are self-subverted and self-censored, often producing conflicting narratives of their lived experiences. Today, all the communities and every person I interviewed have fully accepted their core national identity as Indian, and spare no breath in asserting it as if every such opportunity is some sort of a test. So delicately do they thread their stories that even I as the collector of their stories feel compelled and responsible to state and acknowledge their nationalist position by default. Thus, this entire process of documenting the oral histories of the War through the experiences of local communities is both exhilarating and nerve-wracking, and often feels like a heavy responsibility.

A better lens to understand local narratives would be by framing the realities and histories of borderland regions with the understanding that these regions become a borderland only within a particular historical context, and only when viewed from certain locations. Otherwise, the region and the indigenous communities have their own rich histories threading the expanse of the region to far more broader frontiers.

Since time immemorial these communities living in the region had their own autonomous ways of life, and maintained measured interactions and distance from other communities and from different state systems. The coming of the modern state system, regulations and creation of boundaries abruptly re-oriented all these relations and their local systems. But post the 1962 War these boundaries became more real and entrenched, restricting age old movements and interactions. This territorialisation emphasised Indian nationalism which drew a dividing line between the old life of local communities and their subsequent life.

The rest of the *Issue Brief* highlights some excerpts of stories from my fieldwork. I started collecting these stories in 2019, and the process is still on-going. My objective has not been to simply gather facts despite the pressure to limit myself thus, but on understanding the stories of my elders. As an oral history project, the effort is to seek the perspectives of indigenous communities on the 1962 War, what they understand of what happened and how they feel about their experience. Many elders were pleasantly surprised that someone had come to ask them about these memories and wished to document it, while their own neighbours, grandchildren and relatives chided them saying, "Ah... not again!" They narrated their stories like stories they would tell to pass on to their younger generations, recollecting old-memories and stitching together and mending their traditions and community histories, with no pretence of an authoritative account. There were also those who were very conscious of being documented, wanted to be correct, and under huge pressure to self-censor.

Wartime: A Normal Life Disrupted

Tashi Wangdiⁱ, recalled how life was normal before the War, how only the normal things mattered to life, and also the time when he thought he had lost his family.

“I was in my village during the war, me, my uncle and four other people—a total of six of us—went down to Dirang (a journey of around two days' walk though high hilly mountains) to get salt and other materials.ⁱⁱ We took ten *khacchar* (mules) with us to carry loads. I don't remember the exact date, but on that day, we saw a helicopter dropping supplies and goods with a parachute tied to it. We were near the power camp on the side of the Jaswant Ghat when we saw it. It was a different kind of helicopter with its open back. It was dropping goods as it was flying around. We were wondering, “Why is there so much noise? Maybe they are dropping ration”, and we just went down.

After reaching Dirang, we purchased our supplies of salt, sugar, etc. and made a sack of 25 kilos each. One horse could carry 50 kilos, so we would load and tie a bag on each side of the horse. Then we saw there was a commotion and many people were fleeing. They were labourers; in those days, there were many Tibetan and Nepali labourers around. In those days, there were no labourers like Biharis and Adivasis like now. We were wondering what was going on, why were there so many people? Somebody said they heard that China had attacked and ‘finished’ Tawang. We all got worried and started wondering about the salt, which we had already bought. Where else could we take them and how? So, we left the salt in one of the houses we knew.

I was sitting near a shop when our *Kotoki*,ⁱⁱⁱ Nyerpa Khou, came; we call *Kotoki* as Lho-sepa. So, I asked him, ‘When did you start from the village?’ He said, “A day before yesterday,” “Did you see my parents?” “I went to your house and asked someone which side your parents ran? They said they had no idea.” We left the horses, me, my uncle and two more people. After two days of climbing back, I reached a place called Pedurap, which is a shortcut route. When I reached there, I found my parents had also taken shelter there. They had run from the village and taken this shortcut route through the forest. I started crying when I saw them, and seeing this, they also started crying. They thought I must have lost my way and died somewhere in the wilderness, and I thought my parents had died in the village itself. Then we all went to Singam and stayed there for some time. From there after a few days, I and four more people, went to our village to look at our houses. When we reached there we found that the entire village was taken over by the Chinese army.”

The Trauma of Surviving a War

Tashi Koncho^{iv} recalled seeing a number of dead bodies during the War and the deep trauma it left. He said,

“I should not say such a thing about Hindustan, if I say they would feel bad about it. At the end, I also eat Hindustan's salt. After China left, a group came from down (from the plains) to gather the details. Just like we do potato gardening—the dead bodies were buried in rows, here, one body then the other one, then another one... The bodies were barely covered with soil... Just after a few days the dead bodies were discovered above the ground. Dogs had pulled them up and started eating them. The smell of the bodies was everywhere. One could not run away from it. If you go to the forest, there is a smell; if you go to the *nala* or stream, there is a smell. I tried to go far away from here to a cleaner place, but when I smelled my hands, they smelled of dead bodies. Why? If I try to light a cigarette, even the cigarette would smell like a dead body. I must have lost my mind (laughs).”

Many Mishmi villages which lay between the Walong warfront and Assam also had stories of saving, receiving and sheltering retreating soldiers who had lost their way. They said soldiers kept on appearing from the forest long after the Chinese withdrawal, sometimes in a group or sometimes just one or two together. Sometimes the villagers took food from their children to feed the soldiers.

People mourned and felt sorry for the lives of soldiers that were lost to the tragedy. In one story, speakers from Menchukha shared about the large number of deaths of soldiers from the Madras Regiment who lost their way as they were retreating. The common narrative was that unlike the Assam Rifles and Gorkha Regiment armies, who were familiar with the terrain, “those soldiers were air dropped here and did not know the terrain, they did not die by guns but because of starvation and cold.”

Invariably, there were also comparisons made between the attitudes of the Indian and Chinese armies. One female informant shared, “the Chinese people were very nice to Mishmis. They didn’t harass our girls. They were busy with their own work. They never came to order us or demand anything. Unlike the Indian army, Chinese army did not have any extra people to carry their loads.^v They themselves were carrying their own loads.” However, elsewhere in Menchukha, the locals saw many Tibetans who were brought as porters by the Chinese army. Some of these porters were their old friends and they had emotional partings knowing they might never see each other’s again.

Conclusion

The stories collected in this project were being recalled and told after many years of the actual event. There were few who had already narrated their stories many times before, and hence, sometimes they had very clear narrative structures and well recollected memories. There were also others who had fragmented memories, and there were many who had nothing to share because their villages were unaffected, or they never paid it much attention as they had to continue their lives and move on. However, this endeavour still remains important. It is important to insert ordinary people’s experiences of such events which drastically altered their lives at one point of time, while writing their histories. It is important to assert the significance of people who live along the borders with their attendant risks. National histories should not be written without the histories of border peoples, even if they are at margins of nations.

My project seeks to collect the stories and memories of indigenous people of Arunachal region before they are completely lost to present and future generations. The elders I spoke with often layered their stories with community histories, their identities and world views. When I wanted to talk about the War they wanted to talk about their origin stories, beliefs, spirit world, local histories, hills, specific indigenous knowledge of fabric making from a particular plant growing in a particular corner of their valley, about people trespassing their hunting grounds, and more. They weave a strange and unique worldview and ways of life as they piece together their memories - memories that are often unimaginable today. People-centric history provides us the opportunity to revisit the past from these indigenous lenses and lived experiences.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Interviewed in April 2019. Names of people and places have been changed.

ⁱⁱ All the communities in the region have been bringing their salts from Tibet following their traditional trade routes, till the establishment of the Indian administrative set ups which also

brought along small markets or co-operative shops supplying essentials.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Kotoki* were the local intermediaries and political interpreters appointed by the government. A practice started by the Ahom rulers but later adopted under British government in the hills, they used to enjoy immense influence and power in local administration until their role diminished.

^{iv} Interviewed in April 2019. Names of people and places have been changed.

^v Portering for carrying loads for army and for officials, especially forced portering, has always been a touchy issue for the local communities. Interviewed in April 2019 in Tezu.