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The Mount Everest Controversy Between Nepal and China

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Mount Everest,¹ the highest peak in the world, lies about the point of intersection between longitude 86.6 E. and latitude 27.59 N. on the Mahalangur range of the Himalaya in the Kirat area of eastern Nepal (district East No.3). The Himalayan range which this peak crowns, is about three miles long. It has on its northern side the Tibetan area of "Chang". On its east is Lhotse (27,890 ft.) and on its west Nuptse (25,680 ft.). The peak is surrounded on all sides by glaciers: Rongbuk on the north, Kongmung on the east, Imja on the south and Khumbu on the west. The Thyangboche monastery (12,000 ft.) marks the highest point of human habitation on the south. On the north there is habitation as far high as the Rongbuk monastery (19,570 ft.).

The local name of Mount Everest is not clear. The Nepalese historian Babu Ram Acharya named it "Sagarmatha" (head of sky) in 1938, and in Nepal it is known by that name. In Tibet its name is Chomo Lungma (or Jolmo Lungma or Jhyamo Lungma).

From 1921 to 1953—for three decades and more—as many as eleven expeditions had been organised. Eight of these were for the express purpose of getting on the peak; and the rest were for the purpose of finding out the route. The then Rana Government of Nepal refused permission to these expeditions. All attempts, therefore, except the attempts made in 1952 and 1953, were undertaken from the northern side and with the permission and blessings of the Dalai Lama. Nepal started giving permission only after 1949. A Chinese expedition led by Shin Chang-Chum claimed to have successfully made an assault from the northern side in 1960.

1. Mount Everest is named after Sir George Everest, who was Surveyer General of India and undertook the survey of this region in 1850.

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The dispute about the Mount Everest arose in the course of boundary negotiations between Nepal and China, when the Nepalese Prime Minister B.P. Koirala was on a State visit to China in March 1960. The Chinese did not lay any specific claim to it, but their map showed not merely the Everest, but the entire Mahalangur range within five miles of the border.² The Chinese case was based on three grounds. (1) expeditions undertaken from the northern side were with the Tibetan permission. Nepal never objected to that. (2) Whereas the Tibetan name for Everest was Chomo Lungma, Nepal had no name or in any case a recent one. (3) The Thyangboche monastery, on the southern side of the watershed, was at one time under the religious jurisdiction of the Rongbu monastery, which was in Tibet. Obviously, the Chinese contention was mixing up the religious jurisdiction with territorial claims.

On learning the Chinese claim the Nepalese Prime Minister was "taken aback" and firmly refused to entertain it.³ The Nepalese side argued, on the basis of geography, literature, scriptures and tradition, that the Everest belonged to them and they also had a name for it. The two Prime Ministers could not come to any agreement. The matter was raised by Koirala during his meeting with the Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung, who unilaterally suggested some sort of a joint ownership of the mountain. According to a Nepal correspondent, who had accompanied the Prime Minister on China visit, the Chinese insisted that expeditions to Mount Everest should be jointly authorized by them. To this the Nepalese did not agree⁴. No agreement having reached, the two sides agreed to discuss it again during the forthcoming visit of the Chinese Premier to Nepal. The issue was kept out of the purview of the Joint Boundary Committee, which had been instituted to delineate and demarcate the Sino-Nepalese boundary.

On his return to Kathmandu the Nepalese Prime Minister disclosed the Chinese claim⁵. The disclosure was deliberate. The

2. *Asian Recorder*, 21-27 May 1960 : 3330.

3. *Ibid.*, 30 April : 6 May 1960 : 3294.

4. *The Hindustan Times*, 5 April 1960.

5. *Kalpana* (Kathmandu), 4 April, 1960.

idea was to whip up the Nepalese public opinion and impress China with strength of popular feeling against any compromise on the issue. Infact, Koirala observed in the Nepalese Parliament on 12 April that the nationalist sentiments expressed against the Chinese claims strengthened his hands.⁶

As could be anticipated, Nepalese public opinion was greatly agitated, and the country was filled with intense anti-Chinese sentiment. Nepali Congress and Gorkha Parishad were in the forefront of the agitation, but even the Communist Party and other pro-China groups felt highly concerned. Tanka Prasad Acharya stated that Mount Everest was a Nepali possession, and hoped that the issue would be settled in a peaceful way.⁷ The Communist Party was in a quandry. Everest being an emotionally explosive national issue the party could not go against the current. Its leaders pleaded for a peaceful approach and a negotiated settlement. The General Secretary of the party Keshar Jung Raimajhi claimed the Everest as a Nepali possession.⁸ On another occasion, Raimajhi wanted that the Chinese view should be heard, and charged the Government, with deliberately raising the issue on the eve of the visit of the Chinese Premier⁹. Even the extremist leaders of the Communist Party. Tulsi Lal Amatya, Man Mohan Adhikari and Pushpa Lal pleaded for a peaceful settlement.¹⁰ Bharat Shamsheer, the leader of the Gorkha Parishad, pressed for an adjournment motion in the legislature. The Nepalese press strongly spoke against the Chinese claim. The anti-Chinese sentiment reached its climax on 20 April 1960 when 18 social organizations led by the Nepali Congress organised a demonstration to oppose the Chinese claim and express the popular concern.¹¹ Even King Mahendra, who was on a State visit to the United States at this time, declared at a press conference at Honolulu that the Everest was situated inside Nepal.¹² The Nepalese Prime Minister shared

6. *Motherland* (Kathmandu), 13 April 1960.

7. *Samaj* (Kathmandu), 9 April 1960.

8. *Janata* (Kathmandu), 7 April 1960.

9. *Samaj*, 24 April 1960.

10. See *Nepal Press Digest* (Kathmandu), 18 April 1960.

11. *Kalpana*, 21 April 1960.

12. *Times of India* (New Delhi), 22 April 1960.

THE MOUNT EVEREST CONTROVERSY

151

the popular feeling and categorically stated in the Parliament that so long as he was the Prime Minister not an inch of Nepalese territory would be surrendered.¹³ He assured the House that the issue would be discussed during Chou En-lai's visit to Nepal. The Nepalese Government also urged the people to accord him a warm welcome.¹⁴

Next attempt to resolve the Mount Everest controversy was made in April 1960 during the visit of the Chinese Premier Chou En-lai to Nepal. Nepalese public opinion being agitated, it seemed to place in jeopardy the entire relationship between the two countries.

The Nepalese Prime Minister, although had taken a forthright stand that Everest belonged to Nepal, showed a clearer understanding of the Chinese point of view. He conceded that the northern side of the mountain belonged to China and that it had administrative jurisdiction up to an altitude of 17,000 ft.¹⁵ For him the main question of national importance was whether the peak of the highest mountain belonged wholly to Nepal or whether it has to be shared with another country.

The Chinese, however, had not moved from their earlier position regarding the mountain. In his press conference on 28 April 1960, Chou En-lai took a clear stand and clarified that:

We have never laid any territorial claim to Mount Jolmo Lungma (name in Tibetan) or Sagar Matha ever since the question was raised during the talks in Peking. Chairman Mao Tse-tung, when he received Prime Minister Koirala, expressed the view that we could follow the Nepalese delineation which shows the mountain on the boundary line, that is to say, with the northern half of the peak belonging to China and the southern half of the peak belonging to Nepal. Since Chairman Mao Tse-tung's talk with Prime Minister Koirala, our Government has all along maintained this attitude.

13. *Commoner* (Kathmandu), 19 April 1960 and *The Statesman* (N. Delhi), 26 April 1960.

14. *The Hindustan Times*, 24 April 1960.

15. *Ibid.*, 1 May 1960.

On my present visit to Nepal, I held talks with Prime Minister Koirala to seek a friendly solution. Prime Minister Koirala told us that historically any one who climbed Mt. Jolmo Lungma from the South had to secure a visa from His Majesty's Government of Nepal while anyone who climbed the mountain from the north had to secure a visa from Chinese Government. This is a fact, and we agreed to what he said. At the time, we expressed acceptance of the delineation on Nepalese maps, namely, to draw Mt. Jolmo Lungma on the boundary line.¹⁶

When again questioned he preferred to remain vague by stating that "there was no question of dividing it. We shall continue to conduct friendly consultations. The mountains links up our two countries, and will not separate (the) two...." He did not see any contradiction in accepting the Nepalese maps and continuing negotiations which he considered "a matter of diplomatic relations". Thus, by restating the earlier position the Chinese Premier kept the position ambiguous.

The public position of the Nepalese Government had also become rather vague, Koirala observed that :

China having accepted the map of Nepal in connection with Sagarmatha, differences relating to it have now been considerably narrowed down to a point.....I shall study the geographical factors and historical facts and enter into correspondence with the Chinese Premier. I hope this question will be settled to the mutual satisfaction on the basis of friendship subsisting between the two countries.¹⁷

But gradually it veered round to the view that the peak of Mount Everest had to be shared, without ever publicly stating so. Mao Tse-tung once proposed to name it "Sino-Nepalese Friendship Peak". Nepal did not agree. It took the view that the crest belonged to it, which was largely for the purposes of records and for popular

16. A.S. Bhasin, *Documents on Nepal's Relations with India and China, 1949-96* (New Delhi: 1970), : 270-1.

17. Chitta Ranjan Nepali, *Nepal-China Seema Sandhi (Kathmandu)* 1965.

consumption. When on 25 May, reports of the Chinese success in climbing the peak from the northern face reached Kathmandu, a hue and cry arose again.¹⁸ The Chinese, had presented a *fait accompli* and put the Nepalese Government in a dilemma. The Chinese had not done more than what they had claimed and there was a well established custom of undertaking the expeditions from the north without the Nepalese permission. What pricked the Nepalese most was that the leader of the Chinese expedition referred to Everest as the highest peak of fatherland. In a hurriedly summoned Press Conference on 28 May the Nepalese Prime Minister conceded that China was not obliged to inform or take permission from Nepal.¹⁹ There was thus no occasion for lodging a protest. He, however, reiterated Nepal's stand that Everest belonged to Nepal alone, which was again for popular consumption. It was clear that he had practically reconciled himself to the idea of sharing Everest. Only he hesitated to acknowledge this position openly. Helpfully the Chinese also informed Nepal that Everest had not been described as the highest peak of the Chinese fatherland.²⁰

It was, finally, decided not to refer the Everest issue to the Joint Boundary Committee, as the Chinese wanted, but to settle it by correspondence between the two Prime Minister after the Committee had finalised the delineation of the entire boundary. It also meant that a solution of the Everest dispute was to be sought politically at the highest level.

Final attempt to find a solution of the dispute was made, during the State visit of King Mahendra to China in October 1961. By this time political conditions in Nepal had significantly changed. Having dismissed the Nepali Congress Government, the King had taken over the reigns of the government. Nepal's relations with India were seriously strained and the Sino-Indian relations also drifted from bad to worse.

King Mahendra, who had made nationalism the kingpin of his policies, could not publicly take a compromising stand on the

18. *Swatantra Samachar* (Kathmandu), 28 May 1960.

19. *Commoner*, 28 May and 2, 3 and 7 June 1960.

20. *The Statesman* (New Delhi), 3 July 1960.

issue of Mount Everest. Indeed he and his Ministers had asserted time and again that Everest belonged to Nepal.²¹ They had even declared themselves to be against the idea of joint ownership.²² The King realized, however, that if the Chinese adopted a firm attitude, it would be difficult to make them concede to Nepal the entire ownership of the peak. He was, therefore, anxious to see if anything could be achieved during his visit. The time seemed to be propitious with the Chinese so accommodating towards Nepal because of strains in Sino-Indian relations.

There were long and indecisive negotiations from 1 to 5 October. The King and Premier Chou En-lai took up the matter several times. According to a Nepalese version:

The final round of talks between the two Committee leaders, which began on the evening of 4 October, continued without break up to 6 O'clock next morning. They wrestled with the problem with a view to reaching friendly settlement. Even the King and the Premier sat up almost the whole night in their eagerness to hear the decision arrived at between their representatives.²³

It is difficult, on the basis of the available information to surmise what exactly passed between the leaders of the two countries on the Everest issue. The Sino-Nepalese Boundary Treaty of 1961 stipulated that the boundary line "runs generally southeastward along the mountain ridge, passing through Chou Oyn mountain, Pumoti mountain (Gnire Langur) *Mount Jolmo Lungma* (Sagar-Matha) and Lhotse to Makalu mountain...." This implies that since the boundary runs through Everest, the peak stands divided. The general impression in Kathmandu is that the peak is under the joint ownership of the two countries, with the side visible from south belonging to Nepal and the one visible from the north belonging to

21. *Hindu* (Madras), 30 August 1961 and *The Hindustan Times* 30 July, 1961 and 19 September 1961.

22. *The Statesman* (New Delhi), 13 August 1961, and *Indian Express* (New Delhi), 29 September 1961.

23. Nepali, *op. cit.*

China²⁴. On the question of granting permission to international mountaineering expeditions, nothing is clear. This implies that both sides can grant such permission each within its jurisdiction. This conclusion is not merely textual; the map of the Sino-Nepalese boundary made public subsequently also confirms this position.²⁵

While the Chinese press has maintained a discreet silence on the interpretation of the position of Mount Everest, the Nepalese leaders have continued to claim the peak and have often made vague observations. According to the Nepalese version of the working of Joint Boundary Committees: "By this Treaty Sagarmatha was placed within the Nepalese territory as clearly and unequivocally as the Sagarimatha area on the basis of the traditional, customary borderline".²⁶ The King also, on his return from China, chose to remain vague. He observed:

.....all the Nepalese will experience a sense of glory when I State that Sagarmatha, on which the eyes of the world seem to be focused, continues to be *as it has been* (emphasis added) our and within our territory.²⁷

The Nepalese Foreign Minister, Tulsī Giri, repeated that the peak of Everest lay inside Nepal. He also added that China would inform Nepal of all expeditions from the north.²⁸ Some news papers also agreed that the peak belonged to Nepal.²⁹

All these public declarations were, perhaps, necessary to satisfy the public sentiment; and the Chinese interestingly did not contradict them. It would appear that both King Mahendra and the Chinese

24. This impression is based on extensive interviews with important people by the author in Nepal. According to one source nothing could be decided in regard to Everest during the visit till the eve of the signing of the Boundary Treaty. The Chinese wanted to sign the treaty without mentioning anything about it, while the King insisted that he would not sign the treaty without settling the Everest issue finally. The night long session on 4 October ultimately resulted in a secret exchange of letters. (The source of this information wants to remain anonymous).

25. *The Times* (London), 10 October 1961.

26. Nepali, *op. cit.*

27. *Proclamations, Speeches, and Messages* (Kathmandu, 1967) Vol. 2 : 56.

28. *The Hindustan Times*, 29 October 1961.

29. *Gorkhapatra* (Kathmandu), 10 October, 1961.

equally needed to come to terms on this problem. The King could not have climbed down on this issue of Everest without damage to his image. Nor could he have done without a Boundary Treaty. The Chinese wanted Boundary agreement with Nepal in view of their dispute with India, but they did not want to give up the peak entirely. Thus a compromise was inevitable. What the Boundary Treaty states is not very clear. It seems that the peak has been divided with Nepal keeping the southern face and calling it Sagar-matha and China keeping the northern side and calling it Jolmo-Lungma.