

Nehru's 1962 debacle

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Confusion over the responsibility for lack of preparation for the Chinese invasion of 1962 still hangs around like a poor relative. When I asked a Chief of Army Staff why the Henderson-Brooks Report was not released, he made the bald statement: "Because it shows Nehru in a bad light". For a detailed explanation we need to turn to the memoir of a distinguished soldier who headed the Eastern Command before the debacle. General S.P.P. Thorat published his "From Reveille to Retreat" in 1986.

Thorat comes from a distinguished Maratha family of Satara. Mane Thorat was an important general and companion of Shivaji. Later the Thorats backed Maharani Tara Bai and were loyal when others compromised with the winning side of Maharajah Shahu. Thorat's ancestors rose in revolt against the British at the Battle of Panhala in 1844. Despite knowing his history, the British inducted Thorat into the Indian Army. He saw battle both in the North West Frontier and against the Japanese Army in the North East, gaining the Distinguished Service Order.

General Thorat was a straightforward person and writes clearly. In 1959 he was made head of the Eastern Command, which included Assam but excluded NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh as it then was). NEFA was under the protection of the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force with no equipment and training for battle and controlled directly by New Delhi. Yet NEFA was on the McMahon Line with Tibet.

Thorat and General Thimayya, the Army Chief, protested that it would be impossible to defend Assam, let alone NEFA, if the Army was not given jurisdiction for the protection of the entire McMahon Line. Thorat feared control would be given to the Eastern Command only at the last moment and he would be unable to do anything useful without proper planning and without time to take appropriate defensive measures.

Despite lack of any direct responsibility, he produced a paper on the possible scenario of a Chinese invasion. This he did without help from New Delhi and he offered it to his subordinate officers for their criticism and checking.

The final paper deduced that: (1) the Chinese had 112,000 troops in Tibet, (2) they could move large forces in the summer through Towang-Bomdilla, Longju-Daporijo-Ziro and Rima-Kibithoo-Teju routes into NEFA, (3) that the Chinese would be able to advance halfway into NEFA and (4) at that stage logistics and the onset of winter would force the Chinese to withdraw. He wrote: "Militarily, China is in a position to do this, for NEFA is totally undefended. So I must press the Government to hand over the defence of NEFA to the Army" (p.195).

His strategy was for Eastern Command to take control of NEFA, use the reinforced Assam Rifles to meet the first Chinese thrust, delay their advance, move aside in the face of superior Chinese forces, letting them through and closing in after the Chinese advanced through the gaps. Then the Main Force of the Army would begin the counter attack and throw the Chinese (now losing momentum, weakened by distance and lack of supplies) back across the Himalayan passes.

For this to happen, he needed additional troops and equipment, strong bases which would resist Chinese attacks but maintain positions behind Chinese lines and roads and airfields to be able to supply his forward units. "Certainly", he wrote, "the Chinese advance cannot hope to reach the Brahmaputra Valley. At best it would stop midway in NEFA. The majority of invading forces would have to return to Tibet before the passes become snowbound. Then the Chinese hold on NEFA will become loose and I should be able, if not to evict them, at least to greatly reduce their offensive ability" (p.194).

The Note was signed on 8th October 1959, three years ahead of the attack! It was supported by Thimayya and handed over to the then Defence Minister V K Krishna Menon for onward submission to Prime Minister Nehru. The Eastern Command even carried out a war game called Exercise Lal Qila on March 17, 1960, which confirmed their deductions. Very little of what Thorat wanted was done.

Thorat also opposed Menon's 'Forward Policy' as the Army was not yet ready to meet the inevitable Chinese response. "It was my unshakable conviction that if I were to listen to the Defence Minister, adopt his Forward Policy and send troops to the McMahon Line without adequate maintenance cover, I would be sending them to their certain defeat and death." He even told Menon to his face. Menon's response: "Re-examine the whole problem"(p.202).

Thimayya left in May 1961. Needless to say, Thorat was superseded by Thapar who took over until the debacle. General Kaul was made Eastern Commander, who ran away from the battlefield to New Delhi. Both Thapar and Kaul were related to Nehru. The inevitable happened. Thorat says: "This (Chinese) thrust came exactly as I had predicted in my paper of 8th October 1959...in every respect it vindicated the stand I had taken "(p.203).

Incidentally, a former Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs told me their China Division recommended bombing the passes to cut off the Chinese retreat and supplies and reinforcements. But this too was not heeded. Nehru sent for Thorat soon after the debacle. He describes Nehru's condition: 'haggard-looking', 'vacant expression on his face' with 'clouded eyes'. "He was holding an unlit cigarette in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other with which he was cutting the cigarette into small pieces. It was a pathetic sight".

Nehru asked if Thorat had "any inkling of the disaster". Thorat told him that he had given the Ministry warning and referred to his note of 8th October 1959 which he had sent to "the Chief who told me he had forwarded it to the Defence Minister."

"It was never shown to me", Nehru snapped. Thorat gave him his copy and writes: "He read the paragraphs indicated by me. Then he lit a cigarette, offered me one, and proceeded to read the note from the beginning. When at the end of about 20 minutes he finished reading the paper, he half rose in his seat and said: 'Why was it not shown to me?' 'You may like to address this question to Mr. Krishna Menon, Sir', I replied, with ill-concealed sarcasm."

"Menon, Menon!" he exploded, 'why have you got your knife into him? You people do not realize what an intellectual giant he is' ".

This "intellectual giant" led India, the Indian Army and Nehru to the worst defeat and humiliation in 60 years. They have not only named the road in front of Sena Bhavan in New Delhi after Menon but a huge ungainly statue of him faces the Headquarters of the Army he humiliated, disgraced and let down. The Army HQ is expected to swallow its humiliation on a daily basis!

And Nehru, who supported and cosseted the man, did not himself resign after the debacle as any decent statesman would have done but died in office and is enshrined in the Nation's memory as a hero. Such are the rewards of this Republic.

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