

The Bone of Contention in the Indo-China Conflict-TAWANG

By

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Abstract

Tawang district in Arunachal Pradesh, is right on the the Indo-China border and is the only palce in India that was occupied by China in 1962, when the Indo-Sino war erupted. Since then, Tawang has been the disputed territory between the two countries. Bumla Pass and Sela Pass separate Tawang from China and today, Tawang is a beautiful destination to visit, rich with history and culture.

Keywords

Tawang, Indo-Sino War, Bumla Pass, Sela Pass

Introduction

The picturesque Tawang in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, is the border district, right at the cusp of India and China. It has seen countless border scuffles in the past, as it was in Tawang that the Indo-China war of 1962 began, and this is where the ceasefire was implemented. China still claims Tawang to be theirs, and the people of Tawang are the only Indians who have lived under foreign occupation after gaining Independence from colonial rule, in 1962.

Tawang's History

A visit to Tawang and its majestic monasteries and the presence of His Holiness Dalai Lama can be felt everywhere. In 1959, the Dalai Lama fled Chinese-held Tibet and entered India

through the Tawang region. Tawang had remained under the rule of Tibet and was incorporated into the Indian Union in 1951 by Major Bob Ralengnao Khathing, a Manipuri Tangkhul Naga frontier officer, and his troops.

China had always claimed its authority over Tawang, as Tawang Valley is wedged between People's Republic of China, Tibet, and Bhutan. When the war began, Chinese forces advanced across the border, and the Indian soldiers retreated towards Assam. The locals in Tawang too tried to flee their homes, as they feared China would make a Tibet out of Tawang as well. Those who could not leave spent days in terror in the jungles, as the Chinese soldiers built their camps in Monpa villages. In December 1962, the last Chinese soldiers left Tawang after having occupied the area for almost two months.

Bumla Pass, Sela Pass, and Their History

Tawang Valley is connected with the mainland through the Sela pass that lies at a height of 13,700 ft, and marks the entry point for the administrative jurisdiction of Tawang. Recently, the government inaugurated the Sela tunnel for an easy approach to Tawang.

Bumla Pass is perched at an altitude of about 15,200 feet, and it is right where the Indo-China Border is situated. Bumla Pass serves as a significant passageway between India and Tibet (China).

In 1962, the Chinese invaded Arunachal Pradesh through the Tawang sector, and Bumla and Sela Passes witnessed the most ferocious of wars. Bumla Pass acted as one of the many battlegrounds.

Sela Pass, on the other hand, has a more fascinating history. The story is associated with Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat, who was serving in the 4th battalion, the 4th Garhwal Rifles in the North-East Frontier Agency. He solely guarded the post for 72 hours and single-handedly fought against and killed around 300 Chinese soldiers. The bodies of the Chinese soldiers were buried near Sela Pass, and their graves are still there, reminding us of the bravery and struggle behind winning Tawang's freedom. The nation awarded its hero,

Jaswant Singh Rawat with a Maha Vir Chakra and built the Jaswantgarh War Memorial in his memory.

According to the locals, Sela and Nura were Monpa sisters from Tawang, who helped Jaswant Singh Rawat by providing him with food and ammunition. They also sacrificed their lives in the war, and, in order to honour the sisters for their contribution in the war, the pass was named after Sela and the popular Nuranang Falls were named after Noora.



Image 1: Sela Pass



Image 2: Bumla Pass

Present Day Tawang and Our Trip

We travelled to Arunachal Pradesh in May 2024. Our first stop was the little town of Dirang, and from Dirang, we set out for Tawang, which is a larger district and at a higher altitude. So, there are hours of climbing up the winding mountains, along the Sela Pass. Sela pass is always covered with fresh snow, and the beauty is breathtaking, with the frozen Sela Lake and white mountains. There are small tea shops that serve tea and Maggi and provide clean washrooms. The 1962 war story is etched on the walls of Jaswantgarh War Smarak, where lay the graves of 300 Chinese soldiers.

The next leg of our Tawang journey happened to be the most eventful, a visit to BUMLA Pass, the Indo-China border. Having started as early as 7:45 am, a 1-hour ascent brought us to the Army checkpoint, where a permit had to be generated. One more hour, and we were at Madhuri Lake (Madhuri Dixit's song from the movie Koyla was shot here). The lake is vast and scenic with many picture-perfect views. We spent 30 minutes at the lake and proceeded to Bumla Pass, which is at an altitude of 15200 feet. Bumla, as mentioned before, is the Indo- China border, it's extremely cold, very beautiful, and totally covered with snow. The soldiers take you to the border in groups and talk about the past wars fought in Tawang. It is always snowing, so it gets extremely chilly at Bumla, make sure to carry a lot of warm clothes. Bumla Pass closes down during winter months, it becomes unapproachable due to heavy snowing.



Image 3: Madhuri Lake



Image 4: Enroute Bumla Pass

Tawang City Tourism

Tawang city in itself is worth spending an entire day, with the massive Tawang Monastery, Giant Buddha statue, the prayer wheels and the War Memorial. Tawang market is lined with pretty little gift shops and cafes. The War Memorial also hosts a Light and Sound show in the evenings, enriching the audience with information about Indo-China War and Tawang. There is an army presence almost everywhere in the town.

We were informed by the locals, that October too is a good time to visit Tawang, the vibrant Tawang festival with traditional and live performances happens then.

Winters from December to February are rather harsh they say.



Image 7: Tawang Giant Buddha

Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh is a beautiful hilly state and Tawang, situated on the Indo-China border is a tourist destination with rich cultural heritage and friendly people. The memories of the 1962 war are fresh here, Tawang is often the epicenter of many territory disputes between India and China, but with our brave soldiers posted here, we can rest assured that Tawang will always remain an integral part of India.

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About the Author

Preethi Warriar has completed her Masters in Electronics Engineering and is an Assistant Professor. Apart from the technical stuff, she enjoys weaving short stories around those little, heart-touching instances that happen around us.

She is one among the winners of the TOI Write India Campaign Season-1, for the famous author Anita Nair.

Her work can be found in anthologies like Arising From The Dust, Born Too Soon, She-The Warrior, Travel Diaries, Secret Diary, A Kaleidoscope of Asia, Sharing Lipstick and Shattered.

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