

# Shrinking Political Space and Political Crisis

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A rich literature exists on Tibetan geography, culture, political and social system is not a difficult task as one could find tremendous number of literatures on it. But combing the rich and profound history of once powerful Monarch with regard to their present political and cultural status may need an intellectual exercise. Tibet's historical status and its relation with north western neighbors including China, Mongolia, Nepal and India affirm the fact that once Tibet was an independent and powerful Monarch and it had maintained intensive political, economic and cultural relations with its neighbors. But, as every Tibetologists observes, the Chinese factor refigured the geographic, political and cultural life of Tibetans and put the normal and peaceful life of Tibetans into chaos. The Chinese annexation of Tibet, British and Russia's political interests in the region destroyed and disturbed a well-organized and framed socio-spiritual system. This understanding would be enhanced when we see the destiny of Tibetans to run a parliament in exile or virtual in sphere.

In order to examine the life world of Tibet, this chapter has basically divided into three sections-

Early Tibet (pre-1914), Tibet after Chinese occupation (Tibet after 1959) and Tibet in the contemporary world (Tibet; 1960-1990). The situation of Tibetans or Tibetan refugees after 1990 are deliberately avoided in this chapter as it's examined in detail in the forthcoming chapters. As observed above, main objective of this chapter is to understand two phases of Tibetan life-a community known for its rich cultural assets in the ancient era and the repercussions made by Chinese authority on Tibetans and their life in exile. It's an astonishing contradiction to see that an established and well off community of early period now struggling for three basic needs of life-food, clothing and shelter. As the crux of this thesis is to understand and analyse the changing socio-economic and political life of Tibetans in Nepal, the root causes for their forceful movement from Tibet to Nepal, India and other corners of the globe have been examined here. The Tibetan National Uprising against Chinese imperialist policies is mentioned. In addition, it gave a minuscule description about the huge human rights violations committed by China in their war against Tibet.

### *Tibet: Socio-Cultural and Political Life*

Tibet, a predominantly agricultural society, forms a part of the Tibetan Plateau in Asia. It stood as a consolidated territory for the first time under the Tibetan Empire from the seventh to ninth centuries AD. The Empire was founded by NamriSongsten around 618 AD, who was the thirty second king of Tibet and belonged to the Yarlung Dynasty. He kept expanding his territory till 630 AD, the year in which he was assassinated. The first great emperor of the Empire was his son, SongstanGampo, under whom the whole of Tibet came under a centralized administrative system. He is known to have introduced Buddhism to Tibet. Under SongstanGampo, Tibetan scholars were sent to Kashmir, India to learn Sanskrit. Tibetan language was developed during his reign. The script of Tibetan language was devised. In 779

AD, Buddhism was made the state religion of Tibet. The great empire of Tibet saw a downfall with the civil war in 840s that followed the death of its last emperor Langdarma.

Buddhism played a significant role in shaping the history of Tibet and so it is very important to read the historical developments in Tibet along with the history of Buddhism there for better understanding. Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to Tibet as a result of the influence of two of SongstanGampo's wives, Bhrikuti who was a Nepali princess and Wencheng who was a Chinese Princess, both Buddhist followers. Buddhism enjoyed great patronage under Gampo. Translations of Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan were encouraged under his reign and temples were built. This continued during the times of the next three emperors of the Tibetan Empire. The growth of Buddhism dealt a huge blow during the time of the last emperor, Langdarma, who was a follower of the indigenous Bon religion. His anti-Buddhist policies contributed a lot in restricting the growth and spread of Buddhism though for a short span of time. In 842 AD, Langdarma was killed and the period after that saw efforts at reviving Buddhism in Tibet, which culminated in the Buddhism renaissance in 978 AD.

For Tibetans, a peculiar geographic position or location in the Asian continent gave Tibet a strategically supreme status. Generally, Tibet is defined and described as territories with the high-altitude ecosystem and Tibetans as the inhabitants who are ethnic Tibetans. The central, south western and western regions of Tibet shares borders with Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, and India. As all these locations are characterized by sloppy and rough landscapes, the inhabitants in the region continue agrarian life. During the reign of thirty third King SongstenGampo, the region witnessed introduction Buddhism as a way of living and religion. The same King attempted to expand Tibet territory through conquest. Due to the threats from Genghis Khan in the early thirteenth century, Godan Khan and SakyaPandita, Mongol leader and Tibetan Lama, established a relationship. This relationship formally continued without any disturbances through respective successors from the Sakyas through the Dalai Lamas in the early twentieth century.

This relation had resulted in signing of series of treaties between Godan Khan, SakyaPandita and Tibetan Lama and objectives of these treaties intended to check China's attempt to attack on Tibet, Chinese suzerainty or control of Tibet alongside limited Tibetan self-rule and to establish complete Tibetan independence. In the course of time, because of its inclination to Buddhist ideas and principles and its geographic isolation, it had developed institutional structure consistent with Buddhist values. The monarchical Buddhist culture paved the way for a detailed political and cultural institutional set up. It had also carried out constant spiritual education to monks and nuns. Such extra attention paid to political and spiritual aspects of the life enhanced the population of monks and nuns in the region.

Since centuries, Tibetans were often employed in trade with Nepal and India. For such trade purpose, they travelled across the South Asian region and settled for long durations. Though Tibet had smooth relation with China in the beginning, Tibet distanced itself from China after the demise of the Qing Dynasty. But the expansionist Han policies of China declared that Tibet is a part of Chinese empire. The Chinese administration of those periods sated that politically and culturally Tibetan region comes under the control of China. Eventually, attempts to make stable and unified Tibet had started and to some extent, it was successful. Later, in the year 1913, the thirteenth Dalai Lama unilaterally declared independence. In continuation of this, the Simla Conference happened in 1914 which looked at the border issue between Tibet, China and Britain. Though all parties agreed the independent status of Tibet,

China did not ratify it. Since then, Tibet had been facing continuous political and cultural aggression from China.

### *The Political History of Tibet*

Politically, the Tibetan plateau including the three provinces of Tibet-Amdo, Kham and U-Tsang, extends over an area of 60,000 sq. miles. The geographic, ethnic and political boundaries during the pre-1950 period were very complex and it borders on the erstwhile Soviet Union, India, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and China. The ethnic boundaries of Tibet stretch beyond the political. Population of the Tibet race inhabit Nepal, especially in Tamang region, Bhutan Sikkim and along the westward Himalayas they are found in varying numbers in the Indian hill districts of Garhwal, Kullu, Spiti, Lahaul, Ladakh, Kashmir and NEFA. The question of a political boundary is undoubtedly the most controversial. In 1914, the British negotiated an agreement with the Dalai Lama, the result of which was the division of Tibet into Inner and Outer Tibet. In the course of history, Russia always claimed control over portions of Tibet lying across her own borders. The Chinese claim that Tibet is an integral part of the Chinese Republic, which led to the present crisis of Tibet and Tibetans.

Behind the Cyclopean Himalayas and KuenLun mountain ranges, Tibet towers in all sides above the three most populated countries in the world; China, India and USSR. As far as India is concerned, Tibet has a great strategic significance to India. The high altitude of Tibet and its geographical location has been a most effective natural barrier against the possible Chinese aggressive designs in the Himalayas. Thus Tibet has direct links with India's security interest in the north.

### *Political System in Tibet*

Politically, Tibet reflected both centralized and decentralized feudal theocracy. As per the theocratic norms, Tibetans follow a centralized government in Lhasa and that was headed by a man known as the Dalai Lama. Dalai Lama was considered as the apex of social and political structure and a secular ruler of Tibet. In order to make the system on perfect way, certain measures needed to be implemented. Therefore, they maintained a military force, issued currency and launched postage stamps, engaged with governments and acted as a final court of appeal. It appointed government officials and their main function were to collect tax, settle disputes and punish criminals. It also carried out certain other duties like liaison between the central government and the area of Tibet they were administering.

In the case of Tibetans, there is no dividing rule between religion and politics. Due to the combination of religion and politics, the institution of the Dalai Lama is regarded not only as spiritual leader but also political head of Tibet. Tibetan's strongly believe that Dalai Lama is the incarnation of the patron deity of Tibet, *Chenrezig*. If one look at the political institutional structure of Tibetans, one could see Dalai Lama stands at the top, then comes a chief minister and followed by cabinet of one priest and three laymen. It is also followed by a court which dealt with matters concerning the large body of monks in the country, and below this the national assembly or parliament.

Kashag is the name called for Tibetan cabinet and each cabinet member known as Ashape. The cabinet has long and powerful stands on all issues affecting socio-political and cultural life of Tibetans and it has extensive controlling power over the internal administration of the country. Kashag is assigned with certain extra responsibilities which look after revenue and tax related tasks. It has the strength of around three hundred and fifty, seems always active and engaged and half of them lay and half ecclesiastical.

*China Tibet Disturbances and the Emergence of Tibet as Buffer State and: 1914 -1949*

There are several international political developments which have directly impacted the political life of Tibet. Britain's presence in South Asia and their pertaining colonial rule during the First World War made them to change their policies in the region. The First World War diverted Britain's attention from Tibet. Britain had an ambition to bring Tibet within the British-spheres of influence. Just after the war, Britain suggested certain socio-economic programmes for the socio-political development of Tibet. It had helped Tibet in many ways. For instance, the number of Tibetan army increased from 5,000 to 15,000, to enhance the communication line, a telegraphic line was constructed from Gyantse to Lhasa, in order to resolve energy issues, a small hydro-electric plant was built and a small military force was established. Moreover, an English medium school was set up in Gyantse in 1924.

At the same time, Britain has shown its double stand on Tibetan issue as they officially stated to the Chinese that they saw Tibet as an autonomous state under the suzerainty of China. It created lot of disturbances inside Tibet and the Tibetan leaders were disappointed with such decision. Later, many Tibetan youth protested and pressurized the political heads to keep aloof from Britain. At the same time, Tibet decided to go and make close relation with China. The intention behind such move was to avoid British mediation in this dispute and lessen the Chinese threats on Tibet. The other reason could be the Tibetan nobility and monks had traditional ties and economic interests in China.

One could see that the Tibetan nuns and monks were interested in developing political and cultural relations with China. In continuation, the thirteenth Dalai Lama had regular correspondence with the then President of China, Yuan Shikai. Moreover, there was another incident occurred which also helped China to intervene into the issue. The rift between the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama gave an opportunity to the Chinese to interfere in Tibet's internal affairs. Altogether, this period had witnessed both constant clashes and compromises between China and Tibet. At the same time, the role of Britain further deteriorated in the region.

As a result of these political developments, the Chinese government sent a mission to Tibet for first time in the history of China Tibet relations. The mission was headed by Ms. Liu, an expert on Tibetan culture and politics. Later, in the year 1933 especially on the occasion of the death of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, the Chinese send a delegation and has shown respects to the divine person. Whatever is the form of engagements and mode of action, the main Chinese intention was to establish firm and cordial relations with Tibet. The crucial milestone occurred in the year 1940, April. The continuous negotiations and exchanges between both regions, helped China to establish its office of the commission of Mongolian and Tibetan affairs in Lhasa.

The smoothly operating political and cultural relations between China and Tibet had actually created a potential enemy. The undisturbed relations between the periods of 1920-1940 had provoked Britain and it forced them to send their political officer for Sikkim, Frederick Williamson to Lhasa to offer his good offices, indirectly to reassert its control in Tibet. The intention was very clear and China and Tibet together had decided to counter such outside threats by taking some brave steps. In retaliation to British act, the Tibetan government denied the intervention and rejected British offer of special status. Tibet made its stand clear and rejected unwarranted interference in its foreign affairs, and decided to stick on with its traditional policy of isolation.

During the same period, the international political arena was witnessing one of the most important periods. The Second World War shook the world even the Asian continent with its threats. The same period also witnessed the emergence of many colonial states as independent and free one. The political and cultural leadership of 1940s Tibet looked at this opportunity as a way to claim their demand for a separate nationhood and go away from the political control of China. In order to replicate this idea of free Tibet and demand for a new nationhood, the Tibetan Government of 1943, set up the Bureau of Foreign Affairs under the Kashag. The intention was to inform the office of the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission in Tibet that its business should be conducted with the Bureau and no longer with the Kashag directly. It had an another motive too as the Tibet leaders think that if relations with foreign countries could be formalized, these nations would in turn recognize and support the Tibetan claim to sovereignty. Such an unexpected move from Tibetan counterpart actually shocked China and eventually it strained the China Tibet relations.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

At the end of Second World War, China emerged as a member of the Big Five Powers. Its Security Council seat and emergence of India in the region compelled the Tibetan leaders to sensitize their problems in the international scenario. Moreover, the birth of a new free, sovereign and independent state called India on 15 August 1947 enhanced the confidence of Tibetan leaders and they continued with their pressure on China for a free Tibet. The Chinese response was harsh and India turned bit negative to Tibetan demand as India took a non-interventionist approach. Later, the collapse of Kuomintang regime and the emergence of the People's Republic of China with its inclination to Communist ideology were the two influential political incidents. The new re-united China decided to crush any movements for a free Tibet campaign. During the same period, in 1949, the Tibetan Government made a last desperate attempt to declare independence. The Kuomintang mission in Lhasa was pushed out and the Tibetan Government declared that-Tibet was an independent and neutral country anxious to live in friendship and amity with China and India. Many other studies have been done in this regard and significant findings have been achieved.