

OPINION

Tibet And Tibetans After Five decades of Chinese Invasion

Prakriti Chakraborty*



Almost eighty years ago famous English writer, *Aldous Huxley* in one of his small articles, passed sarcastic comments about Tibet where he said that 'No matter how bad we have it here, we can always take solace that it's worse in Tibet.' He also referred to the darkness due to superstitions of Tibet. Tibet was forbidden land because of high Himalayas. In the year 1774 the first Westerner who visited Tibet was George Bagle, a high ranked officer in the Government of India during the colonial rule. From that time onwards slowly Tibet became popular in the Western world. During the 1950s, Tibet was in the headlines quite frequently in the Western media especially after 1959, when

China occupied Tibet and His Holiness the Dalai Lama (*Nawang Lobzang Yeshey Stanzin Gyatso*) fled to India with about eighty young Tibetan leaders.

On March 10, 1959, the entire population of Lhasa surrounded the Dalai Lama's Norbulingka Palace. They revolted against the Chinese rule, which had continued for the past nine years. But the situation reached a climax when the Dalai Lama was invited by the Chinese commandant to attend a function inside the Chinese camp with a condition that he should come without his bodyguard. The people of Lhasa decided to prevent him from attending the Chinese function and surrounded the palace. It continued for two days. Finally on March 17, the Dalai Lama fled to India.

**Dr. Prakriti Chakraborty is Sr. Lecturer, Department of Indo-Tibetan Studies, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal. Email: prakritiob@gmail.com.*

On March 21, when Chinese Government came to know about it, they started shelling the palace. Thousands of people with children who were camping around the palace were killed in a brutal manner. The entire regiment of the Dalai Lama's bodyguards was disarmed and killed openly in public. The main target of their attacks was the monasteries— the symbol of Buddhist religion and repository of many valuable things. There were many monks in these monasteries who took part in the fighting and the primary target of the Chinese attack was to destroy their domination over Tibetan administration which they regarded as a priestly feudal system. The three large monasteries of Tibet in and around Lhasa area—*Sera*, *Drepung* and *Gaden*— which were the hubs of learning for Tibetan Buddhism like *Nalanda*, *Taxila* and *Vikramasila* in India once upon a time. These monasteries were first shelled and then all religious treasures housed there were taken away. The Chinese authorities justified the action as it was in line with the communist position on religion and they argued that the feudal system associated with the religion had to be pulled down to bring communism to the Tibetan people. Gold and silver idols and other religious artifacts were melted down to make bullets and monks and

nuns were forced to dance together as a mark of open display of disrespect to the religion. The monastic system which earlier dominated Tibet and Tibetan for centuries was destroyed beyond recognition and is in a state of disrepair ever since.

The Chinese Government blamed those Tibetans protesting Chinese action against the Dalai Lama as 'Rebellious Bandits'. The Chinese official media reaction was :

Betraying the motherland (*China*), the Tibetan Local Government and the upper strata reactionary clique colluded with imperialism-assembled rebellious bandits and launched armed attacks against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The valiant units of the PLA stationed in Tibet completely smashed the rebellious bandits. Now, the units of PLA, assisted by patriotic people of all sections, both monks and lay, are mopping up the rebellious bandits in other places in Tibet.¹

According to unofficial estimates, more than 86,000 Tibetans were killed during this period by the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). They wanted to get rid of all those Tibetans whose only demand was to preserve their way of life, their religion, and culture, and save the life of their revered

leader the Dalai Lama. This public awakening is celebrated as Tibetan National Uprising Day, every year on March 10, and it continues to inspire the new generations of Tibetans around the world. However, the Chinese Government refused to accept this historical truth that the entire population of Lhasa demonstrated in front of the Norbulingka palace on March 10, 1959 and revolted against the Chinese rule.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, then Prime Minister of India, was deeply hurt by the tone used by Chinese Government in 1959. During the debate session in the Indian Parliament, he said that the Chinese couched their reaction in the 'cold-war language': "To say that a number of 'upper strata reactionaries' in Tibet were solely responsible for this appears to be an extraordinary simplification of a complicated situation."

Nehru declared in Allahabad, on April 6 that although he had full sympathy with Tibet and its people, he did not want any action, which would in anyway affect the 2000-year old relationship of friendship between India and China. Nehru referred to the developments in Tibet and said that the *Dalai Lama* asked for his permission to enter India and

he gladly gave him the permission. He also made it clear to the Indian audience that political asylum had been granted to the *Dalai Lama* at the latter's request. He also elaborated that the developments in Tibet had created a very complicated situation for India and reiterated that while India had full sympathy with the Tibetans, it still wanted to keep its friendship with China intact. He emphasised that even though India wanted to help them, it did not want to get involved in the dispute.

After taking full control of Tibet, in the name of abolishing the feudal system of Tibet and bringing Tibet and Tibetans the PLA was actively engaged in the task of wiping out the separate identity of Tibet and Tibetan by completely destroying, ravishing and bulldozing ancient culture, custom, religion and faith the Tibetan people.

Patrik French, a Tibetologist and author of the book *Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land*, believes that the destruction of the Bamyian Buddha by Taliban is similar to the grand festival organized by the PLA to celebrate the destruction of the Buddha idol in the most ancient monastery of *Jokhang*. He quotes from *People's Daily* (November 1968), in which success of Cultural Revolution is depicted as follows:

In the past every household had a clay Bodhisattva, while now every house has a portrait of Chairman Mao.....now they seek advice from Chairman Mao every morning..... everyday, they sing, 'The east is Red.'.....This is very interestingly; the *Dalai Lama* in his memoirs "My Land and my People" extols *Mao Zedong* as "a remarkable man" and "an outstanding personality" who convinced him that "he himself would never use force to convert *Tibet* in to Communist state". The *Dalai Lama* also revealed that "I was also attracted to Marxism; I even expressed my wish to become a communist Party member."

However, French also writes that in his first autobiography His Holiness reminisced about an encounter with Mao Zedong, where Mao said: "Tibet is a big country. You have a wonderful history. A long time ago you conquered even a huge part of China. But now you have fallen back and we want to help you. After twenty years you will have surpassed us and then it will be your turn to help us". The Dalai Lama could hardly believe what he had just heard. Nevertheless, he thought that *Mao Zedong* had said this out of conviction and not out of cheap showmanship.

Beijing always rejected the fact that its policy in Tibet was wrong. But the

fact of the matter was that in 1959, the Tibetans had revolted because Central Tibet had faced hardship and famine, which was intentionally created by the occupying troops. The Chinese officials blamed it on the 'Dalai Clique' and said :

These rebels represent imperialism and the most reactionary major serf-owners.... as the motherland is thriving and prospering day by day, the policy of the Central People's Government toward Tibet is correct. The PLA enjoyed the warm support and love of the people of all sections in Tibet and the rebellious conspiracy of a handful of reactionaries had no support from the Tibetan people. The Chinese premier, *Mr. Chou En-lai*, in his reference to Tibet in his report to the National People's Congress in Peking on April 18 1959, stated that social reforms in *Tibet* would be carried out step by step "with full regard for the specific conditions in Tibet" and that in course of the reforms, "the religious beliefs and customs and habits of the Tibetan people will be fully respected and the fine aspects of Tibetan culture will be upheld and developed".

During 1987-1989, Tibet Movement started gaining ground in rich countries of the world and the Dalai Lama emerged as the symbol of a just movement for restoration of

the genuine rights of the Tibetan people. To the Western world, this movement is a popular agitation which has transformed once 'forbidden' Tibet to an export-worthy commodity in the world market. Analysts like French believes that this type of agitation will not be able to make a dent on the Chinese Government. There is a difference between the real problem of Tibet and the mystical Tibet. About mystical Tibet, *Hu Richardson*, who was the representative of the British Government in *Lhasa* in 1943, quoted from poetry of nineteenth century poet Henry Newbolt:

*In the dim region all men must explore
The minds Tibet, where none gone before.*

Fifty years later, Beijing remembered those tragic days in a very strange way. Few official lines quoted from the recent news on Radio Lhasa say:

In 1959, democratic reforms were introduced in Tibet, giving ownership rights to peasants and nomads, abolishing the feudal serf system which blended religious and temporal authorities. Since then the Tibetan people have followed the socialist path; a new era started. For the past 50 years, under the correct

leadership of the Communist Party of China, the liberated Tibetan people became the master of their own state; they exercised their power in the fields of politics, economics and culture etc. The Tibetan people moved from darkness to light, backwardness to progress, poverty to prosperity and closed door to open door policy.

However, the actual situation is totally different. Most of the so-called liberated serfs, still deeply resent Chinese occupation of their country. The spontaneous protests in Lhasa in 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1993 have all been examples of this public indignation. On the eve of March 10, 2009, the monks of the Drepung monastery marched to Lhasa to commemorate the 1959 uprising. As protests escalated in Tibet, China accused the Dalai Lama of pursuing designs of a 'Greater Tibet' carved out of one quarter of its land-mass and asked other nations to shun contact with him. President Hu Jintao promised to build a "Great Wall" against Tibetan Separatism. Chinese Foreign minister Yang Jiechi told in a news conference:

The Dalai Lama and his followers insist [on establishing] a greater Tibet on one quarter of the Chinese territory. They want to drive away the Chinese armed forces deployed on

this territory. They want to drive away all the Chinese people and other ethnic groups who have been living in Tibet for generations. The Dalai Lama is not a religious figure, but a political figure”.

These sharp attacks on the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people caused led to tension in Tibet with days to go for the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese. As in 1959, they saw only the hand of the ‘Dalai clique’ behind the popular agitation. Tenzin Tsundue, the popular Tibetan youth leader and poet-activist, said that

“the Chinese Government described the people’s uprising as a disturbance instigated by the ‘Dalai clique, thereby belittling the Tibetan nation’s aspirations and insulting the intelligence of the six million Tibetans inside Tibet. This is symptomatic of colonial powers that treat colonies as treasure islands and their citizens as exotic beasts on leashes. The Chinese Government should stop its propaganda that the *Dalai Lama’s* return to Tibet would re-establish “serfdom and feudalism”.

The communist party chief in Tibet, *Zhang Qingli* called the *Dalai Lama* as “a wolf in monk’s clothes, a devil with a human face. Those who do not

love the motherland are not qualified to be human beings”.

When in March 2008, protests swept across the entire Tibetan Plateau in a popular movement that was reminiscent of the *Lhasa* uprising of March 1959, the international media asked the Dalai Lama, “Do you support this riot? Can you stop it?” He replied: “No, I can’t. I have no magic power”. He accused *Beijing* of turning *Tibet* into “Hell on Earth” through periods of martial law and hard-line policies. But at the same time he always urged the Tibetans to maintain peace and support for the “Middle way”, which calls for significant Tibetan autonomy under Chinese rule. He stated, “I have no doubt that justice of Tibetan cause will prevail if we continue to tread a path of truth and non-violence. The Dalai Lama’s “Middle path” approach for resolving the issue is a moderate policy has been adopted democratically by the Central Tibetan Administration and the Tibetan people. It stresses equality, non-violence and mutual cooperation among all the concerned parties He came under tremendous pressure from the younger Tibetans to abandon his mild approach in favour of a more proactive and aggressive one. As usual, *Beijing* has always been following its two-pronged

approach towards the Dalai Lama, engaging him through talks but also accusing him of plotting bloody riots. The Chinese Government warned him that if he could not control his young followers then they would break off the possibility of talks. Squeezed from both sides, the 73-year-old leader wants to retire from political life. In November 2008, in a special conclave in Dharamsala, the majority of the Tibetans reaffirmed their support to his non-violent approach.

Even though the Tibetan youngsters take to aggressive and confrontational actions, their common credo remains non-violence. Tibetan youth leader Tenzin Tsundue has reinforced this line and said: "For both Tibetans inside and outside our land, the undeclared common strategy of the movement is to live through this difficult struggle with patience, and outlive the dictatorial Chinese leadership to witness changes in China".

Dr. P. Stobdan, a senior security analyst at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, argues that if the Dalai Lama retires from political life it could mean the collapse of the Gelukpa's supremacy which would, in turn, fuel dissensions along sectarian lines, resulting in a final victory for China,

because the controversial 17th Karmapa has got Beijing's blessings apart from the Dalai Lama's recognition. For India, Tibet will continue to cause some anxiety. It is not inconceivable that Beijing may, at some stage, pressurise New Delhi to dismantle his set up in exile at Dharamsala. India needs a more sophisticated policy that goes beyond simply curbing the Dalai Lama's activities.

Presently, there is a ray of hope that Tibet could figure prominently on the Obama Administration's radar as an American state senate has adopted a resolution to ask the Obama Administration and the US Congress to give "Diplomatic recognition" to Tibet and take "forceful" action to end "repression" of human rights by the China. It has also reiterated and urged them to ask China to sincerely negotiate with the representatives of the Dalai Lama to solve the Tibet Problem.

But now the time is running out; that is why, fast thinking and fast action are the call of the hour because in this 21st century if a country is blotted out from the world map the entire world cannot watch it without concern. Recently, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Tibetan uprising, the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama revealed in an

interview to the media in India that his willingness to work with Beijing towards reconciliation to find a solution within the framework of the Chinese socialist system and his desire for “genuine autonomy”, not separation.

His holiness also said after the conclusion of the recent round of talks, which ended in stalemate, that while he was ready to leave the past alone some kind of International discussion

or research or investigation about the past history of Tibet should begin. The Chinese government insisted, on the contrary, that the Dalai Lama should acknowledge that the region was historically a part of China which was one of the sticking points in the talk. It needs to be underlined here that whatever be the international status of Tibet, the history of Tibet being an independent country is even recorded in some of the Chinese annals by their ancient historians. ■