

## CONFLICT IN TIBET: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS

**Abstract:** *The paper looks at the internal and external dimensions of the on-going Tibetan conflict and argues that these two facets of the conflict are intertwined and should not be viewed separately or independent of one another. Internally, the factors which have contributed to the conflict include repressive Chinese state policies such as Han migration from China proper to Tibet, economic development in Tibet as defined by the Chinese state, and the PEC campaigns just to mention a few. Externally, foreign powers like India and the US have been involved. India, for instance, has provided Tibetan monks and the Dalai Lama with refuge after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950's. Extensive field trips were taken to both India and China from 2015-2019 to carry out the research for this paper. In addition to using a range of secondary source material, the paper makes use of participant observation as a key research method to further its arguments.*

**Keywords:** China, Tibet, India, Identity, Nationalism, Conflict

Since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950's, relations between the Chinese mainland and Tibetans have by and large been strained. More than five decades have gone by, and even today Tibet remains a flashpoint and one of the troubled hotspots in the Asia Pacific. At its very core, it is a nationalist secessionist movement. It is essentially a conflict between the centre and the periphery. Like other conflicts in Asia such as Kashmir, the Tibetan conflict is also multifaceted and has both internal and external dimensions. The aim of this paper is to take a look at these different dimensions and analyse them in detail. The external dimensions of the conflict should not be viewed separately but as intertwined with the internal dimensions of the conflict. The paper further argues that internally the factors that have contributed to the on-going problem include repressive Chinese state policies such as cultural assimilation or what some analysts call cultural imperialism, economic development as defined by the Chinese state and migration of the dominant ethnic group (Han) from China proper to Tibet. Externally, there has been a lot of cross border movement and there is a strong Tibetan presence in neighbouring countries like India, Nepal and Bhutan from where Tibetans inside Tibet get both moral and material support. These transnational connections go a long way in keeping the distinct Tibetan identity and Tibetan-ness alive and this paper especially pays attention to India's role in the Tibetan conflict.

The entire trans-Himalayan region is dotted with many Tibetan settlements and refugee camps. India is often perceived as the biggest threat to the Chinese state because of its size, military might and connections with western allies. Sino-Indian relations have partly been strained because of India's active support for the Tibetan cause. In India, we especially see a strong Tibetan presence in places like Ladakh (especially Leh), Sikkim (especially Namchi, Pelling and Ravongla), Himachal Pradesh (especially Dharamsala), North Bengal (especially Siliguri, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Mirik) and Arunachal Pradesh (especially Tawang). From a cultural standpoint, both India and Tibet have a lot in common. For instance, Tibetan Buddhism is a syncretic fusion between the native Bon tradition of Tibet and Buddhism which travelled from the ancient University City of Nalanda in northern India (Bihar) to Tibet. 'Tibetan Buddhism is rooted in Indian monastic universities such as Nalanda. Beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era and lasting until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, Nalanda and other monastic universities consisted of many erudite scholars and practitioners emphasizing different sutras and espousing a variety of philosophical tenets.'<sup>1</sup> Because of these

strong cultural commonalities and ancient linkages, India's support for the Tibetan cause is likely to continue. This in turn strengthens China's insecurity with regard to its hold over Tibet.

In addition to using a range of secondary source material, this paper makes use of participant observation as a key research method in its analysis. Extensive fieldtrips to the Sino-Indian borderlands were taken from the years 2015-2019 for purposes of this paper. The places that were visited include Ladakh, Sikkim and north Bengal in India, which have international borders with Tibet and Sichuan province in China, which has an internal border with Tibet. The structure of the paper is fairly straight forward. After setting the context by looking at some historical background of Sino-Tibetan relations, the paper moves on to the current situation by discussing the internal and external dimensions of the conflict. Finally, at the end of the paper, based on the analysis peace-building measures have been suggested as the way forward. Before we look at the details of the conflict, let us first of all define Tibet geographically.

### **DEFINING TIBET GEOGRAPHICALLY:**

Tibet means different things to different people. The way the Chinese state defines Tibet geographically is not in keeping with the way local Tibetans define Tibet. The Chinese state uses the term, the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region' and this basically refers to that part of Tibet where most of the resistance against the Chinese state has taken place to become independent. This is also called political Tibet. Tibetans, however, view Tibet in much broader terms. There are ethnic Tibetans scattered all over the Tibetan Autonomous Region as well as in the neighbouring provinces within China like Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan and also across the international border in countries like India, Nepal and Bhutan. This is also called ethnographic Tibet. For purposes of this paper, we will be looking at ethnographic Tibet.

### **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

The Tibet conflict is conditioned by historical memories and both the Chinese state and the Tibetan people under the leadership of the Dalai Lama have used rival interpretations of history to suit their own needs and further their own agenda. The Chinese state argues that it has had continuous control over Tibet since the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). It also argues that the Tibetan question is basically an imperialist plot against China. The Tibetan side argues that the relationship which it had with the central administration in China is one of priest and patron. In other words, the Tibetan Buddhist Lama's were only spiritual advisors to the Chinese kings and the kings in turn provided the Tibetans with protection and security. This was not a relationship of one being inferior to the other politically. Rather it was a relationship of equals like the pope has with the rest of the Christian world. The historical background is necessary to set the context to understand more contemporary developments.

Although Beijing insists that Tibet has always been an integral part of China, it really was a vassal state in the Mongol Empire. 'Mongol contacts with Tibet, for educational and commercial as well as religio-political purposes, were frequent.'<sup>ii</sup> Tibet was ruled by traditional Tibetan Sakya clerics. One key feature of Mongol-Tibetan relations was that the Mongols allowed and actively encouraged Tibetans to govern themselves according to their traditional practices and patronized Buddhism. For instance, 'Kublai Khan allowed religious freedom...Tibetan Lamaism with its necromancy and sorcery appealed to Mongol shamans.'<sup>iii</sup> Well known scholar on Sino-Tibetan relations, Tsering Topgyal

writes, 'The appointment of Tibetans to the post of Imperial Preceptor was advantageous for the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the empire. Therefore, the Tibetans tolerated Mongol over lordship and valued the imperial patronage of their culture and religion. The combination of autonomy and cultural patronage kept the insecurity dilemma out of Tibetan-Mongol relations.'<sup>iv</sup>

The first half of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) saw good relations between the centre and the periphery. 'The Qing presented themselves as rulers of five peoples, whose languages (Chinese, Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian and Uyghur) were accorded equal status, at least symbolically, in the life of the empire. This was an empire that was adept at dealing with different peoples, their customs, beliefs and languages. It administered each in the way which seemed best, or most pragmatic at the time, and given considerations of resource and capability.'<sup>v</sup> Rowe also writes, 'The Qing rulers wore many hats and governed their diverse constituencies in differing ways simultaneously.'<sup>vi</sup> The kings showered the Tibetan monastic communities with reverence, protection and patronage. This patronage led to the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism to other parts of the Asia Pacific. But this patronage started to disappear as the dynasty weakened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Qing weakness gave rise to harsh practices which tried to tighten its grip over Tibet. A process of nationalist state building started with figures like Zhao Erfeng. The 1904 British invasion of Tibet, which compelled the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama into exile in Mongolia worsened the situation. Beijing's state building was accelerated with the rise of Han Chinese in the Qing officialdom especially in the provinces bordering Tibet. There were attempts to replace the institutional and cultural contexts which had served Yuan-Tibetan and early Qing-Tibetan relations well. 'This meant cultural assimilation, abrogating Tibetan autonomy and the end of indirect rule.'<sup>vii</sup>

The Tibetans of Kham rose up against these repressive policies in 1905, which took until 1906 to suppress. The Tibetans also responded with their own versions of state building to counter these Chinese practices. In 1910, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama fled to India when Zhao Erfeng's troops marched into Lhasa. When the Qing Empire finally collapsed in 1912, the Dalai Lama organised a secret war department and expelled the Qing soldiers from Tibetan soil in 1912 and declared Tibetan independence once he returned to Lhasa in 1913. Although Yuan Shikai, President of the new Republic of China apologised, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama responded by saying that he did not require China's approval or disapproval for his rule in Tibet. The assimilationist policies started by Beijing to strengthen its hold over Tibet gradually strained centre-periphery relations. Respect for the distinct Tibetan cultural identity and political autonomy were essential requirements for the Tibetans to cooperate with the centre.

Between the years 1913 and 1950, Tibetans did not face any serious threats from Beijing since China was preoccupied in its own civil war and at the same time resisting Japanese occupation. With the nationalists in power, the Tibetan identity did not face any immediate threat. The nationalists ruled eastern Tibet through a combination of Chinese warlords and native Tibetan rulers. They also rediscovered the importance of Buddhism in order to incorporate Tibet and Mongolia into the modern Chinese state. The Tibetan government based in Lhasa suffered from both corruption and fragmentation and failed to strengthen Tibet's international status when the Chinese were having their own problems. Neither did the Tibetans prepare themselves militarily to resist the Chinese state.

After the victory of the communists in 1949, the Chinese state followed a policy of 'liberation' and started 'liberating' eastern Tibet and then proceeded towards Lhasa, the Tibetan centre. The Chinese state officials believed they were liberating Tibetans from feudal oppression. The CCP has had a tendency of projecting Tibet as a feudal backwater that needed liberation from both Buddhism and its oppressive ruling class.<sup>viii</sup> It was in the October of 1950 that the Chinese PLA/People's Liberation Army invaded Tibet. Fenby writes, 'The PLA had little difficulty in clinching victory, helped by the defection of people in eastern Tibet who disliked rule from Lhasa.'<sup>ix</sup> When the international community remained silent over the invasion and took no action, Tibetan leaders travelled to Beijing to engage politically with the Chinese leaders under Mao. In 1951, the two sides signed the 'Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet', in which the Tibetans accepted Tibet as a part of China. They also accepted the presence of the PLA forces on Tibetan soil. The Chinese side agreed to respect the authority of the Dalai Lama and religious freedom in Tibet and to carry out policies only in consultation with the Tibetan political elite. 'The seventeen point agreement framed Tibet's unification with China as an important step to drive out imperialist domination and to bring social progress and economic development to Tibet.'<sup>x</sup>

In reality what the Chinese state actually practised was quite different to what they had promised in the above agreement. 'Mao's central government did not comply with and carry out the agreement.'<sup>xi</sup> Radical reforms targeting the Tibetan traditional elite were carried out and they also attacked traditional Tibetan identity which sparked a revolt that spread to different parts of Tibet. 'When smaller uprisings against land reform broke out in the Tibetan borderlands in 1956, the PRC increased its security presence in Lhasa step by step.'<sup>xii</sup> The Tibetans viewed the state's policies unfavourably, which was gradually eroding the authority and prestige of the Dalai Lama. Tibetans also felt strongly about Han people moving into their homeland and resented the economic pressures on the local economy. Accounts of both religious and political persecution confirmed Tibetan's suspicions of the Chinese state's real intentions: to get rid of the Dalai Lama, eliminate the Tibetan government and finally wipe out Tibet's distinct identity through Han migration. Tibetans finally responded to these policies by rising up against the Chinese state in the year 1959, which was brutally suppressed. John Andrews writes 'In 1959 Chinese troops were deployed to crush a rebellion in Tibet, which had declared its independence from China in 1913 but had been formally forced (liberated was the word used by Mao) into the PRC in 1950.'<sup>xiii</sup> The Dalai Lama finally fled to India and set up his administration in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. 'The anniversary of the uprising is observed by the Tibetan exiles as the 'Tibetan Uprising Day'; by way of contrast, in the PRC and in the Tibetan autonomous region, it is celebrated as the Serfs Emancipation Day.'<sup>xiv</sup>

After moving to India, the Dalai Lama became preoccupied setting up his institutions in exile. Whilst this was happening, his Tibetan brothers in Tibet were being subjected to what the Chinese state called 'democratic reforms' between the years 1959 and 1966. The Cultural Revolution, which was a tremendous phase of political turmoil in China from 1966 to 1976, had a devastating impact on Tibetan identity and culture. After the disaster of the Great Leap in the 50's, a socio-economic campaign which was meant to modernise China, Mao had lost a lot of his power. 'The economy under Mao suffered grievously in many ways, of which the Great Leap Forward is the most notorious.'<sup>xv</sup> This had adversely affected Mao's political image and he needed to win back the people and get rid of anti-Mao forces and thus started the Cultural Revolution. 'The Cultural Revolution, which remains one of the least fully understood events in modern Chinese history, both within and outside of China, was largely an effort by Mao to reclaim a position of centrality by going around the

bureaucracy of the party and leading a mass movement.<sup>'xvi</sup> It was an attempt to weed out any form of resistance to the CCP. A lot of this resistance came from ethnic minorities and religious groups. Despite the high handedness of the Chinese state during the years of the Cultural Revolution, Tibetans in different parts of Tibet rose up in revolt especially between 1968 and 1969, with the county of Neymo as the main centre. After Mao's death in 1976, Deng brought in more liberal policies that triggered a dialogue with the Dalai Lama. However, it should be noted that Deng's policies were liberal only in comparison to the earlier phase. In other words, political repression still continued. Protests and riots still took place, peaking in 1987 and 1993. 'The Tibetan protests and international criticism provoked a harsh crackdown, including martial law and a hard line shift in policy and dialogue with Dharamsala in 1989.'<sup>xvii</sup>

### **THE TIBETAN CONFLICT AND ITS INTERNAL DIMENSIONS:**

The Tibetan conflict, although multi-dimensional, at its core has been a nationalist secessionist movement and throughout the decades there have been strong separatist tendencies trying to break away from China proper and Beijing. The Tibetan side of the argument is that they are a distinct nation with their own history and cultural heritage that is different to mainland China. What has most certainly exacerbated the situation though is the way the Chinese state has dealt with the situation. In response to the pro-independence riots, Beijing ordered the imposition of martial law in Lhasa in 1989 with Hu Jintao becoming the new Party Secretary of the TAR. 'President Hu had spent years in western China, running the Tibet Autonomous Region as Party Secretary from 1988 to 1992.'<sup>xviii</sup> The state rejected political liberalisation and followed a policy of enforcing stability, rapid economic development in Tibet and marginalizing the Dalai Lama. This policy came to be known as 'grasping with both hands' and showed that the state officials had lost faith in the Dalai Lama to play a constructive role in trying to bring the two sides together. As a part of this enforcement of stability, the TAR became heavily militarized with police, the military and other security agencies. In keeping with Mao's style of political campaigns from earlier times, the state also followed a policy of mass mobilization and ideological indoctrination. The state tried to de-emphasize Tibet's distinct identity and brought Tibetan Buddhist monasteries under Beijing's regulation. By and large the state followed a policy of forceful integration of Tibet into China proper, trampling on religious sentiments in the process. 'Just possessing a picture of the Dalai Lama can lead to arrest for any Tibetan.'<sup>xix</sup>

The Nationality Identification Program deserves special mention as a key state policy in dealing with the Tibetan issue. Although the Tibetan plateau is a multi-ethnic region, Beijings' aim behind the Nationality Identification Program was to negate the identity and aspirations of non-Chinese minorities. It is true that the main work of identification was done in the 1950's by ethnographers using Stalin's definition of nationhood, but the Chinese state continued to exploit the security instrumentality of that project in recent times especially in the wake of the 2008 protests. Furthermore, to secure the situation, a number of coercive steps were taken ranging from a heavy PLA presence in the TAR, arrests and sentencing of participants in the riots, introduction of an identity card system, a drive to identify anti-Chinese elements, a political campaign known as 'screening and investigation' and expulsion of monks and nuns and foreigners from Tibet. Although martial law was lifted in 1990, the PLA presence in Tibet was strengthened with reinforcement from other parts of China and Tibetans were frequently subjected to demonstrations of threatening military power. Apart from military intimidation, between 1987 and 1991, over 3000 Tibetans were

held under detention without trial and many received prison sentences. The atmosphere of fear forced thousands of Tibetan monks to leave Tibet for places like India and Nepal. The Chinese state argued that these measures were a switch from passive or reactive policing to active or pre-emptive policing. In 1992, Chen Kuiyen replaced Hu Jintao as the TAR Party Secretary and Chen followed even more stringent policies to curb Tibetan identity and aspiration. 'This shows that while policies were formulated in Beijing, Party Secretaries had considerable scope for personalising the implementation with either positive or negative implications for the Tibetans.'<sup>xx</sup>

Economic development as defined by the Chinese state has always been one of the policies followed by the Chinese state with regard to Tibet although what was different about this push for economic growth was its strong linkage with security and the aim was to raise the standard of living as a way to undermine Tibetan nationalism. This was obviously influenced by Marxist thinking that religious belief will wither away in the course of the modernization process and Chen Kuiyen proved to be a strong believer in economic development as a solution to the on-going Tibetan problem of secessionist nationalism. Mukherjee writes, 'while it is true that Tibetans have benefitted from this economic development to some extent, it has also caused problems that have deepened the cleft that already exists between the Tibetans and the Chinese state. The Chinese state has insisted that Han Chinese people from China proper play a central role in this growth. This is what local Tibetans have been very unhappy about.'<sup>xxi</sup> Hao also argues that, 'the central government's pouring of money into the Tibetan Autonomous Region or other Tibetan autonomous areas is apparently not really easing the tension in these regions.'<sup>xxii</sup>

There were two main objectives set out at the Third Work Forum organised in 1994. The first one was rapid economic development would have to take place in Tibet to achieve ten per cent growth by 2000. 'A program of 62 developmental projects worth 2.38 billion Renminbi was unveiled. The first stock exchange in Lhasa was opened to expand TAR's market economy. There was a visible shift in emphasis from agricultural development to energy and light industry and infrastructure.'<sup>xxiii</sup> The Western Development Campaign was an extension of an existing economic development strategy with higher levels of urgency and investment, which favoured hard or physical infrastructure building at the expense of soft infrastructure. The second objective at the Third Work Forum was the enforcement of stability in an effort to deal with Tibetan nationalism. This included strong opposition against separatist forces in both the party hierarchy and mainstream society. Wider security concerns were factored in during the implementation of the WDC in Tibet.

In addition to economic development as defined by the state and the enforcement of stability, one other policy which has added fuel to the fire in Tibet is Han migration. This decision to expose Tibet to economic activities by the Han/Hui was taken intentionally during the Second Work Forum in 1984 despite stiff opposition from Tibetan officials. Beijing has refused to restrict the flow of non-Tibetans to Tibet. The Qinghai-Tibet railway line has facilitated the arrival of non-Tibetans, especially the Han, to Tibet. The arrival of Chinese migrants to Tibet, legal or illegal, will create a pro-China constituency, which would help in stamping out local nationalism and also aid the security forces. These migrants are seen as more skilled and are supposedly a professional class who will have a 'modernizing' impact on the people of Tibet especially the monastic community. Chinese migration dilutes local Tibetan identity and reduces the ability of Tibetan people to practise regional autonomy in economics, politics and administrative matters. The emphasis on economic development and enforcement of stability through political repression continued to be central theme's in the Fourth

Tibet Work Forum in 2001 and the Fifth Tibet Work Forum in 2010. Chinese immigration to Tibet has happened as a result of state policy and voluntary migration of Han and Hui Chinese to take advantage of the economic opportunities opened by the state's investment in Tibet. Part of the Chinese population in Tibet is temporary but Tibetans fear that the waves of migration will increase in the future. There is also the possibility that Beijing will legalise their status as residents as the security and stability of Tibet gets worse. Chinese migration has also changed the physical features of the places where they have become residents. For instance, by selling rights to Chinese property developers, many traditional parts of Lhasa have been destroyed and modern style Chinese houses have been built in replacement. Also, street signs and business names are often written in bold Chinese characters with barely visible Tibetan characters.

Beijing's security policies in Tibet have always involved a cultural element. Chen Kuiyen attacked Tibetan culture in the 1990's. For instance, since the 1990's there have been increasing restrictions on the practise of Tibetan Buddhism, which is entrenched in Tibet. Grunflod writes, 'it would be impossible to exaggerate how deeply religion permeated every aspect of Tibetan life, particularly during the past hundred years with the establishment of a theocracy. Tibetan Buddhism has many visible manifestations-there were prayer flags, stupas, religious monuments, stones carved with prayers, charm boxes, prayer wheels and rosaries. The most visible evidence of Buddhism were the monks.'<sup>xxiv</sup> This is also true for parts of ethnographic Tibet, particularly in northern India.<sup>xxv</sup> These symbols of Tibetan Buddhism and monks were regularly attacked. Two senior lama's, Arjia Rinpoche and the Karmapa, escaped into exile due to these restrictions on religion. The Karmapa escaped in 2000 because monks and nuns were increasingly being used by the state in their anti-Tibetan agenda. In 2007 statues of an 8<sup>th</sup> century Indian saint, Padmasambhava in Samye and Ngari were destroyed. On 18<sup>th</sup> July, 2007, Beijing announced Order No. 5, which was a regulation stopping the Tibetan lama's from reincarnating without the prior approval from the central administration. Eastern Tibet also came under tremendous pressure. For instance, the Serta Institute in Kham (Sichuan province), which was started by Jigme Phuntsok in 1980 with a hundred Tibetan students, was attacked in 2001, when Beijing officials came to Serta to reduce the number of monks and nuns since these numbers had grown over the years. Serta had grown into a monastic town with 9300 resident disciples. Around 2000 dwellings were destroyed by the state in the year 2001. The state also attacked Yachen Institute, also in Sichuan province after the Serta crackdown. 'Addressing the ideological and political threats from Tibetan Buddhism is a major concern for Chinese leaders. Initiated by Chen Kuiyen, Tibetan Buddhism has been a special target for his successors, not least for Zhang Qingli, who described the Central Party Committee as the real Buddha for the Tibetans and enforced existing restrictions on religion even more strongly.'<sup>xxvi</sup>

Chen also attacked the Tibetan language. Tibetan culture, in the state's mind was strongly linked with separatism. Simply talking about Tibetan language education could get individuals into political trouble. The neglect of Tibetan language instruction and Tibetan education by the state made matters much worse and only sharpened Tibetan identity. 'Among other measures, Chen curtailed the teaching of Tibetan in schools, closed monastic schools, and restricted the number of monks and nuns to 46, 000 as well as forcing the remaining clergy to undergo patriotic re-education.'<sup>xxvii</sup> For some state officials like Chen Kuiyen, Tibetan nationalism is rooted in Tibetan culture, language and religion and hence Tibetan culture in no way should be encouraged since it has the potential to strengthen separatist tendencies, which will in turn have an eroding impact on Chinese national identity. State officials are now increasingly using indirect ways and more subtle methods to deal

with the situation. For instance, the state feels Tibetan children should be taught the Chinese language and that they should attend schools which have Chinese as their medium of instruction. 'Some Han Chinese view minority culture as backward and minority religious education as being of little value.'<sup>xxviii</sup> The methods and tactics used by Chairman Mao to deal with Tibetan nationalism and identity were much more direct. Chen also lectured to Tibetan intellectuals, dancers, film-makers and musicians, pointing out the flaws which existed in the Tibetan intellectual tradition and encouraged them to perform more communist propaganda pieces from the 50's and 60's . He also urged these Tibetan intellectuals to merge their cultural traditions with that of other nationalities. After Chen's transfer to Henan province in the year 2000, the state officials who took over continued with these harsh policies although there was some variation.

In relation to cultural imperialism, Tsering Topgyal writes, 'Tibetans are fearful that because of the official policies, preponderance of material power and greater freedom of cultural expression of the Han Chinese and the climate of fear, Tibetan culture will lose out gradually in a cultural war of attrition. Pragmatic and materialist pressures could also hasten the process. Some Tibetan families send their children to Chinese language schools at the expense of Tibetan language education, because they see that as the only way they can have better futures. The feeling that there is no future for Tibetan language compels some Tibetan parents to privilege Chinese language education for their children.'<sup>xxix</sup>

Although the state in recent years has used more subtle ways to deal with ethnic minority nationalism in its borderland provinces, along with these subtle methods, there is still an element of continuity with past strategies from the Mao years. In this connection, state sponsored mass political campaigns deserve special mention. State sponsored mass political campaigns have been a recurrent feature of Chinese politics since the PRC's birth in 1949. A few examples would include the Patriotic Education Campaign, Strike Hard Campaign, Spiritual Civilisation Campaign, and the anti-Dalai Lama Campaign. Two of the main themes of the PEC were emphasis of the Han Chinese tradition in politics and teaching of Chinese history especially the versions of history put forward by the state. The PEC also emphasised on national unity and territorial integrity. In Tibet, the PEC was launched in 1996 and monks and nuns became the first targets of the campaign. In Tibet some of the main objectives of the PEC were to undermine the position of the Dalai Lama, to teach Chinese version of history and to promote atheism. Both Tibetan students and officials have been subjected to PEC. Tibetan students were prevented from participating in Tibetan Buddhist festivals and from entering monasteries as part of the PEC. Tibetan parents were told to remove their children from exile schools in case these children were influenced by separatist thought. If parents chose not to go ahead with this, the state made it clear that they would lose their jobs and pension. Although, the PEC was declared over officially in China in 2000, it was still being conducted in different parts of Tibet. The PEC should be seen as a part of the mighty state's nation-building project. To support the PEC, the Spiritual Civilisation Campaign was also launched in the mid 1990's to modernize the economy and to weed out elements of feudal thinking and superstition associated with the Tibetan religion. In addition to the PEC and the Spiritual Civilisation Campaign, there was also the Strike Hard Campaign which specifically targeted separatist groups.

Beijing has gone ahead with all the above through the framework of the RNA/Regional National Autonomy. RNA gets its legal strength from the autonomy law as per Article Four of the PRC constitution. According to this article regional autonomy is practised in places where ethnic



minorities form a regional cluster. In these areas organs of self-government have been established to exercise autonomy. Despite the fact that the Tibetan areas are all quite close to one another geographically, the state has divided Tibet into the TAR, which was established in 1965, ten Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures/TAP and two Tibetan Autonomous Counties /TAC. Tibetans often argue that these divisions have been purposely and intentionally created by the state to undermine the nationalist movement.

‘Beijing attempted to include ethnic Tibetans in the local government but overall control was always vested in the Chinese Communist Party backed by the People’s Liberation Army.’<sup>xxx</sup> The number of Tibetans working for the regional government has gone up in recent years, but the increases in their numbers do not necessarily translate into greater self-rule. To start with, most senior Tibetan officials have only titular power. The chairperson of the TAR is chosen by the central administration in Beijing. Tibetans have better representation in religious and cultural institutions but do not have much power in the influential economic and political organisations such as the Tibetan Party Committee, People’s Congress and the government. The huge presence of the PLA in Tibet has also weakened Tibetan autonomy. The number of laws passed in the local People’s Congress is as misleading as the number of Tibetans working in the regional administration. This is because often these laws are only formalistic repetitions of national or provincial laws. They are not really separate legislations passed by autonomous organs. Single pieces of separate autonomous legislation are hard to pass. This is probably because approval by senior executive and legislative bodies is required, which tend to be Han dominated. The structural biases built into the RNA system, which works against the interests of ethnic minorities have complicated things further. Finally, the high handedness of the state and its unilateral practices has often undermined Tibetan autonomy. A Tibetan has never been appointed TAR Party Secretary, which is the most powerful regional position. Tibetans have been appointed as heads of the regional government. The Party Secretary oversees the general administration and supervises all political work and is accountable to Beijing.

What undermines Tibetan autonomy even more is the context in which China formulates its policies towards Tibet and the heavy emphasis on security within this context. Security has been the main driver behind the state’s policies with regard to Tibet. After Mao’s death in 1976, the United Front Department has been the nominal manager of China’s policy towards Tibet. However, the decision-making process has been a bit over crowded with the involvement of the PLA and other agencies that deal with hard politics and security like the Public Security Bureau, Ministry of National Security, Foreign Ministry and the State Council. The constant influence of the PLA over Tibetan affairs has most certainly caused problems for the practising of Tibetan autonomy. This perpetual military presence in Tibet and the military’s influence over policy making has contributed to the hard line positions in the dialogue process. ‘Ethnic uprisings in Tibet and Xinjiang highlight that China appears to rely heavily on the use of force to maintain stability and has been successful in improving the procedures for this type of counterinsurgency measures to maintain stability in the short term. However, China seems to be less successful with socio-economic reforms that are meant to ensure the legitimacy of Chinese governance over non-Han populations in Tibet and Xinjiang.’<sup>xxxi</sup>

## THE TIBETAN CONFLICT AND ITS EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS:

As mentioned earlier, the Tibetan conflict is very complex and multi-dimensional and has a strong external side to it. The external side should not be viewed separately, but as intertwined with the internal dimensions of the conflict. For instance, the repressive policy which Beijing has followed for decades in relation to Tibet has forced the Tibetan government in exile (in India) to internationalise the Tibetan issue in the 1980's. However, this internationalisation has had adverse repercussions on Beijing's strategy in relation to Tibet. The fear of western or any kind of foreign involvement has toughened Beijing's stance towards Tibet. This hardening of the state's internal policies has galvanised Tibetans into further action propelling them to internationalize the Tibetan issue more and more, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence and becoming a downward spiral.

In the face of inflexibility on part of the Chinese state, violence has often been considered by Tibetans to achieve either political independence or at least more autonomy. For a while Tibetan guerrilla fighters were supported by the American CIA, but their base in Nepal was closed in 1974. Armed resistance started in the eastern parts of Tibet, where the Chinese state had conducted harsh communist reforms in the early years of the Cold War era. As the PLA crushed this resistance in eastern Tibet, the guerrilla fighters moved towards central Tibet and then relocated to Mustang in Nepal from where they carried out raids across the border against Chinese troops with the help of the US, Nepal and India. 'The Mustang population was Buddhist, spoke Tibetan and-even better-the tiny kingdom's monarch was sympathetic to the Tibetan cause.'<sup>xxxii</sup> This resistance gradually weakened and fizzled out due to a number of factors such as internal feuding, objections from Nepal, freezing of American aid and the Dalai Lama's personal request to disband. The current Dalai Lama led international movement is essentially a non-violent movement.

In the last five decades since the Dalai Lama and 80, 000 Tibetans escaped to India in 1959, Tibetans both inside and outside Tibet have been active in keeping their cultural traditions alive. In exile, led by the Dalai Lama, Tibetans have managed to keep the central components of their cultural traditions alive within the limits of refugee life in a foreign country. The key monasteries in Tibet have been replicated on both Indian and Nepalese soil. For purposes of this paper, field trips were taken to places like Leh in Ladakh, Pelling, Namchi and Gangtok in Sikkim, and north Bengal, all of which are in present day India. More specifically the monasteries that were visited were the well-known Hemis monastery in Ladakh in 2015, the Bokar monastery in Mirik in 2019, the Dali and Ghoom monasteries in Darjeeling in 2019, the Durpin monastery in Kalimpong in 2019 and the Sanga Choeling and Pemayangtse monastery in Pelling in 2019 and the well-known Rumtek and Ranka monasteries in Gangtok in 2018. These monasteries are not only affiliated to Tibetan Buddhism but many of these buildings are almost exact replicas of the Potala palace in Lhasa, Tibet.

One very interesting feature of these places is that although affiliated to Tibetan Buddhism, they have incorporated gods from the Hindu pantheon. For instance, on the walls of some of these monasteries, there are various depictions of the Hindu elephant god, Lord Ganesha. I was able to attend Ganesh chaturthi celebrations in Sep, 2019 and noticed that the similarities between the monastery wall paintings of Ganesha and the idols of Ganesha which I saw in Kolkata, West Bengal during the festival were striking. The only difference that I noticed was that whilst in India proper, the elephant god is shown with four hands, in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, there were many more. Also, whilst daily prayers were going on, instruments like the conch shell and incense sticks

which are so abundantly used in Hindu practices and rituals were also being used by these Buddhist monks. It is possible that the central administration in New Delhi has supported the Tibetan cause or allowed Tibetan culture to flourish on Indian soil due to these cultural similarities. In other words these cultural commonalities shared between India's majority religion, Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism may have played a key role in India's sympathetic attitude to Tibetan refugees. Sadly, this has not been the case with Muslim Rohingya's fleeing Myanmar in recent years. It was reported by the Indian media in 2017, 'the centre is exploring ways to deport nearly 6000 Rohingya Muslim refugees living illegally in Jammu and Kashmir after fleeing alleged persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar.'<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Not only have monasteries been built on Indian soil, but about 77 schools have been established to educate Tibetan children in exile including in the Tibetan language. The Dalai Lama is said to have been very successful in creating a cultural nation in exile. Tibetan Buddhism is also being taught to school and college students in exile. Nancy Wilson Ross writes, 'an impressive tribute to the strength of Tibetan Buddhism is the manner in which refugees have managed to keep vitally alive the practise of their religion in new surroundings where grim discomfort and even deprivation are so often their lot.'<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Dalai Lama, Karmapa, and other Lama's also attract a lot of Chinese students to neighbouring countries like India where the Dalai Lama has been active in giving lectures on social, political, religious and environmental issues. For instance, in January, 2006, four hundred Chinese travelled all the way from China proper to a remote town in India to attend a Buddhist sermon.

Tibetans have used their culture to construct a unified national identity that goes beyond sectarian and regional divides and have also used it to get support from the western world for their cause. Tibetan Buddhism gradually spread to the western world in the sixties, seventies and eighties and this has contributed to the positive reception of the Dalai Lama's international campaign. This deployment of Tibetan Buddhism has also been extended to Singapore, Taiwan and also to Chinese people in mainland China. There is a growing interest in Tibet amongst Han Chinese people which has led to a degree of positive receptivity to Tibetan Buddhism. Although an atheistic nation, in a trip to Sichuan province in the November of 2016, I was surprised to see how many Chinese people from the mainland were visiting and worshipping at the famous Leshan Buddha site.'<sup>xxxv</sup>

The Tibetan diaspora, which has a strong presence in neighbouring India, particularly at the places that I visited in recent years, has been preparing for a struggle by strengthening the democratisation of their political institutions and at the same time they have been involved in a dialogue process with Beijing in order to challenge Beijing's hard line policy. Central to this struggle is the support which Tibetans try to get from other governments and international NGO's. Tibetans have also played a role in strengthening their relations with people who share similar cultural and ethnic commonalities. These ethnic brothers and sisters include the Ladakhis, Kinnauris, Sikkimese, and Monpas from northern India, the Bhutanese from Bhutan, and various ethnic groups from Nepal such as the Dolpo, Nupri, Sherpa, Thakali and Walung. On the seventh of January, 2008, the Dalai Lama had given a speech to Ladakhi, Kinnauri, Monpa and Bhutanese Buddhists who had come to southern India especially to hear him speak. The Dalai Lama appreciates the role played by Himalayan Buddhists in keeping the Tibetan identity alive and has also enrolled large numbers in the Tibetan monasteries in India. The Dalai Lama on numerous occasions has made it clear that if the Tibetan identity was at stake, then the responsibility of preserving it and protecting it would lie with the trans-Himalayan Buddhists. Due to Nepal's crackdown on Tibetan protests and because the

Dalai-Lama cannot visit Nepal, Nepalese Buddhists travel to India to listen to the speeches delivered by him. The Dalai Lama has mentioned on several occasions that his reincarnation will be born in a free country outside the territorial boundaries of China. Since the fourth Dalai Lama was Mongol and the sixth Dalai Lama a Monpa from India's Arunachal Pradesh, the next Dalai Lama could very well be from ethnographic Tibet.

Beijing has pointed its finger to what it calls the Dalai clique when it has had to deal with riots and protests in Tibet. It is also believed by some that the international activities of the Tibetan diaspora have actually driven resistance movements in Tibet proper against the Chinese state in recent years. It is also true that the exiles are influenced by events happening in Tibet proper. In other words, the exiles have influenced the homeland and the homeland or events in the homeland have also had an impact on the exiles. This strengthening of connections between the diaspora and the people in the homeland began when Tibetans were allowed to travel in and out of Tibet relatively freely from the late seventies and early eighties after Deng came into power and introduced an era of liberalisation. 'These transnational contacts grew in step with the development of information technology and the onset of cross-border movement of goods and information. Websites, blogs, music videos, radio programs and increasing cross-border physical mobility provide crucial platforms for information exchange between the Tibetan communities. Political literature and other materials authored in exile make their way into Tibet, where they are clandestinely distributed and consumed. The reverse is also true. All these linkages and exchanges are fundamental to diasporism.'<sup>xxxvi</sup> Elizabeth Economy writes, 'Internet activism in China exploded during the final years of Hu Jintao's tenure. The Chinese people logged on to engage in lively political social discourse, to gain access to the world outside China, and to organise themselves to protest against perceived injustices.'<sup>xxxvii</sup>

This transnational cross-fertilization of political activism has increased in recent years despite the high handedness and vigilance of the Chinese state. During the 2008 unrest for instance, in spite of the censorship of the internet, Tibetans were able to email pictures of Chinese brutality against Tibetans to the outside world. This brought the Tibetan government in exile and various NGO's to the fore who have now started to act as a bridge between the Tibetan people inside Tibet and the wider world. To coordinate their activities, Tibetans have used various informal channels of communication. The diaspora conducts its international activities through a network of Tibetan Support Groups, Tibetan Buddhist centres and cultural institutions. At the very core of this international strategy is the Dalai Lama and his charismatic leadership has played a strong role in bringing international support to the Tibetan cause. The Department of Information and International Relations, which is a ministry within the Tibetan Government in Exile does a lot of the groundwork as far as the international activities are concerned. The DIIR has the responsibility of giving the outside world an idea of the political, environmental and human rights situation in Tibet and tries to raise awareness of the Tibetan cause internationally. The DIIR oversees offices of Tibet in New Delhi, London, Tokyo, New York, Geneva, Canberra, Taipei, Pretoria, Moscow and Paris. These associations connect Tibetans to the TGIE since the DIIR is a part of it, and also carry out political activities linked with Tibet in their country of residence. In addition to the DIIR, other bodies fighting for the Tibetan cause and carrying out international activities include the International Tibet Support Network, Students for a Free Tibet, International Tibet Independence Movement, Friends of Tibet India, the Tibetan Youth Congress, Tibetan's Women Association, and the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. The Tibetan Youth Congress and Tibetan Women's Association have their regional branches in different countries and are also allied with Tibetan Support Groups in India and

in the West that share their political objectives. It should be noted that within diaspora politics, some groups take a moderate approach and others take a more militant approach when it comes to dealing with the Tibetan issue. One reason why many Tibetan Buddhists have had to develop a softer approach in their activism is because there has been no real support from foreign powers. Despite the fact that some of these powers share geographical boundaries with Tibet like India, some have been historically involved in Tibet like Britain or strategically interested in Tibet like the US, none of these foreign powers have provided meaningful support. Because of China's rapid rise in recent years and because we live in an era of interconnectedness and globalisation, external powers have been very careful in terms of how much support they actually give the Tibetans. They have been less idealistic and more realistic prioritising their own interests and this has in turn weakened the militant side of the Tibetan movement. Furthermore, some Tibetan activists have also been influenced by the Dalai Lama's emphasis on interdependent existence. That said, international support has come from other quarters. International celebrities, individual Tibetans and some non-Tibetan supporters have made their own contributions to help the Tibetan cause. The aim of all these international activities associated with Tibet is to give the Tibetan issue more visibility in the international arena and to put pressure on Beijing so that it brings about a relaxation in its policies.

#### **INDIA AND TIBET:**

Halper writes, 'India as the dominant power in South Asia may be considered one leg of the three-legged stool upon which rested Tibet's prospective independence. The second leg was the United States....The third leg of the stool was China, convulsed by revolution, haunted by its memory of 19<sup>th</sup> century humiliation, vulnerable and determined not to permit 'splittists'-whether Formosans, Tibetans or Uyghurs in Sinkiang to separate from Beijing's rule.'<sup>xxxviii</sup> During the first few years soon after India gained independence in the year 1947, the then leader and first Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, tried to have friendly relations with both China and Tibet. He spoke of 'Hindi-Chini bhai bhai', which means that as Asian nations living next to each other, India and China were brothers.<sup>xxxix</sup> In his first radio address, broadcast in September, 1946, Nehru described China, which was then under the Nationalists, as a mighty country with a mighty past and that China had been India's friend throughout history and this friendship will only continue to grow in the future. Yet with independence in 1947 and the inheritance of British obligations and rights for Tibet, India soon found that its interests were at odds with that of China's, which made Sino-Indian relations sour. 'Pandit Nehru's dream of Sino-Indian cooperation withered and then collapsed entirely in 1962 with a war that has coloured perceptions on both sides ever since.'<sup>xi</sup>

As mentioned earlier, India has been sympathetic to the Tibetan cause and has allowed the Tibetan monastic community to reside in India especially in the places that I visited for purposes of this paper. Van Schaik writes, 'India's generosity towards the Tibetans was staggering. Vast amounts of government money were spent on refugee camps, food rations and medical aid. Thousands of Tibetan peasants were given paid work on road building projects.'<sup>xii</sup>

One of China's reasons for holding onto Tibet is because it acts as a buffer zone against external attacks particularly from countries like India. 'Throughout history the minority regions have always had a strategic effect in China's national security.'<sup>xiii</sup> Indian counterparts in the security establishment think it is equally vital to Indian national security. Concerns over Indian political support to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugees has been a common item on the Chinese

menu/agenda in recent years especially when Indian and Chinese special representatives have met up for discussions.<sup>xliii</sup> Although India's official policy has been not to allow any kind of anti-Chinese activities by Tibetan refugees in India, in actual practise, it has allowed Tibetans to run a government in exile (registered as the Central Tibetan Administration), has given material assistance for the running of various projects, and has helped in the internationalisation of the Tibetan issue. In short, India has refused to give into Chinese pressure and has not stopped aiding Tibetans in exile. To a large extent this could be because of the cultural and religious similarities that exist between the two countries as discussed in the earlier section. Chinese state officials have often accused the Indian government of interfering in China's internal issues by providing a safe haven for Tibetan refugees and actively supporting their cause.

The Indians have their own fears because of the strong Chinese PLA presence in Tibet and the future of Sino-Indian relations seems to be fraught with uncertainty. India has been defeated by the Chinese in the Sino-Indian War which took place in the year 1962 and memories associated with this war are still very strong. The true extent of China's military presence on the Tibetan plateau is not clear given the secrecy surrounding Chinese military information. This only adds to Indian fear. Also, China's management of water resources originating from Tibet that feed South Asia, particularly India, also has a central place in the Indian security debates. Finally, the unresolved boundary dispute between the two countries has had a negative impact on bilateral relations. 'Sino-Indian mistrust continues to persist well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century-the so called Asian century-and at the heart of this is their unresolved boundary dispute.'<sup>xliv</sup> The two countries share a border of 2520 miles which has not been delimited by a treaty, although officially it is referred to as the LAC/Line of Actual Control. India has accused the Chinese of occupying 38,000 square kilometres in Aksai Chin which is in the extreme north-eastern corner of Kashmir, which they occupied after the 1962 war. The Chinese accuse the Indians of having occupied 90, 000 square kilometres in what the Indians call Arunachal Pradesh and what the Chinese call, 'South Tibet'. The Indian media has reported on border incursions in recent years (Sikkim being another bone of contention), and how China has aided separatist insurgents in India's north-east. The recent Doklam standoff between India and China shows clearly that the border dispute and rivalry over territory is still on-going.<sup>xlv</sup> Because of the above reasons, India is often seen by the Chinese state as one of the hostile external forces trying to exploit the Tibetan issue to further its own agenda and interests in the region.

## **CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD:**

This paper has argued that the Tibetan conflict is one of the most troubled hotspots in the contemporary world. The Tibetan issue is very complex and has an internal side to it and an external dimension. The internal dimension of the conflict and the external dimension of the conflict are intertwined and should not be viewed as independent of each other. They are inextricably related. The internal factors which have been identified as contributing to the problem include Beijing's on-going repressive policies in Tibet. Some of these include Han migration from China proper to Tibet, the enforcement of stability in Tibet by the heavy presence of security personnel particularly the PLA, economic development in Tibet as defined by the Chinese state, subjecting Tibetans to the PEC/Patriotic Education Campaigns and teaching the state's version of history. Other forms of repression include the introduction of the Spiritual Civilisation and anti-Dalai Lama Campaigns which not only undermine the spiritual leader of the Tibetans but forces Tibetan locals to actually participate in anti-Tibetan activities. The external factors which have complicated things further

include internationalisation of the problem and India's role in the conflict. Due to Beijing's policy of high handedness and political repression over the past few decades, the Tibetans have had no choice but to bring more and more international attention to their cause hoping that western governments and the international community will be sympathetic and assist them in their dialogue with Beijing. Beijing's fear of foreign particularly western involvement has paved the way for even more stringent policies in Tibet thereby increasing the levels of tension and fear and escalating the levels of violence. India has also played a role not so much by aiding the separatist groups but by allowing Tibetan culture to flourish on Indian soil and by helping Tibetans with the process of internationalisation of their cause.

The Chinese state would need to take a more federally minded approach to ease the existing tension. As history has shown respect for Tibetan religion and culture and allowing the Tibetans to practise some form of political autonomy would go a long way in making the situation better. One thing which has had an adverse impact on Tibetan autonomy is the heavy presence of the PLA forces. The state could start the dialogue and peace building process with the Tibetans by pulling back the military so that the local people get some breathing space and can begin to think in normal, human and political ways. The Tibetan conflict is not only a conflict that revolves around Tibetan identity, centre-periphery relations and nationalism, but it is also about ethnic minority majority relations. Ethnic minorities are often viewed unfavourably and as we discussed earlier there are in built biases in the RNA system which favours ethnic majority groups and enables them to take up very influential positions in politics. Racism which is often part of the problem is like a societal disease that needs to be treated and cured. To cure this disease, the Chinese state should prevent the projection of negative and stereotypical images of Tibetans in the official media which is what happened especially after the 2008 protests. This is very damaging for ethnic minority majority relations. Tibetans are often subjected to racial profiling, othering and micro aggression on a regular basis by Han Chinese people, which would need to stop. The state would also need to stop denigrating and attacking Tibetan culture. Tibetan education and language should be allowed to flourish. The Chinese state needs to understand that threatened identities do not just disappear. Rather they grow stronger with the passage of time especially when faced with repression. The teaching of history should be left to the experts and to autonomous scholarly institutions and not to the state that can then use education to further its own political interests and agenda. Finally, there needs to be more transparency in the decision making process.

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