

Tibet : Past and Present

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More than two and a half lakh Tibetan refugees live in India. The vast majority of them repose faith in the leadership of the Dalai Lama. At present, his speech and conduct is adorned with civility, democratic sense and flexibility. But, at the time of commencement of Chinese rule in Tibet, that country housed a people bent down under a feudal regime.

Up to 1959, most arable land was divided up into large manors, owned by high lamas and rich landlords. For example, Drepung monastery had 185 manors and 300 pastures, in which worked 23 thousand serfs and 16 thousand animal minders.

There was a classical serfdom. The serfs had to work without wages. The master would tell them what crops to raise and what animals to rear. They had to repair the master's houses and, if necessary, carry his luggage and animals. On none of these matters could they hold opinions. Marriage required permission of the master, with payment of a special tax, and the man could be sent away to far-off places, leaving the girl alone. A fair face among the serfs would entail a call to serve at the master's residence and its attendant dangers often materialised. The master could legally hunt down and bring back escaped serfs.

The high lamas were rich and influential. Ordinary lamas were not well-off. Peasant boys were brought to the monastery for training into lamahood. Tashing Schering is such a lama. He was brought to the monastery from his village. He says he was repeatedly raped from the age of nine. Boys were forcibly brought to be trained as servants, actors, soldiers.

Among lay landlords, foremost was the commander-in-chief of the army. He was a member of the Dalai's cabinet and owned four thousand square kilometres of land and three and a half thousand serfs. The army was actually a gendarmerie of the landlords for protecting their lands and hunting down escaped serfs.

There were a few free peasants, too, and around ten thousand middle class people, comprising small businessmen, shopkeepers and traders. There were also slaves.

RELATIONS WITH PRC

In 1951, the People's Republic of China (PRC) signed an agreement with the feudal rulers of Tibet. But the latter didn't initiate the tasks of reform laid down in the agreement. Mao Ze Dong responded : "Since they are unwilling to implement the agreement, fine; for the present we will let the matter lie. The longer the delay the stronger will be our position and the weaker theirs. Delay won't hurt us. In fact, it may be to our advantage. Let them continue their insensate oppression against the people; we will concentrate on good works like production, trade, road building, medical care, the tasks of the united front (unity with the majority and patient education), and win over the masses, waiting for a suitable time for taking up the question of fully implementing the Agreement."

In 1956, a Preparatory Commi-tee was set up for the Tibet Autonomous Region, with the consent of the Dalai and with him as the chairman. Beijing postponed the time limit for initiating reforms to 1962, withdrew personnel for

directing the reforms, and stopped local training of party workers. But the feudal rulers of Tibet actually had no intention of following the agreement. In 1959, the Dalai fled to India with the help of the CIA. The papers made public by the US State department in 1998 reveal that all through the 1960's the CIA gave 17 lakh dollars a year to Tibetan emigre leaders. The Dalai himself was given 1 lakh 86 thousand dollars a year. The Dalai-led organisation has acknowledged the payment by the CIA of lakhs of dollars during the sixties for sending armed groups into Tibet.

The Dalai has since said that he had been a puppet chairman. The real power was with the party committee. The latter started to foist the reforms on the people in contravention of the agreement and this led to a revolt. It has been claimed on behalf of the emigres that resistance had started since the Chinese entered Tibet after 1949. Guerrilla fighting erupted in the eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo where land reform was initiated. The resistance is said to have spread to central Tibet and a 80 thousand strong army was said to have been formed. The rebels claimed control over most of southsern and parts of eastern Tibet. Every day the Dalai's palace was ringed by thousands of demonstrators till his escape. Armed fights erupted after he left. Martial law was proclaimed. Between 1957 and 1961, the CIA air-dropped, by parachute, Tibetan guerrillas trained by them, and some arms. There were 8 attempts. None succeeded in doing anything except convincing the Chinese that the Americans were intending to interfere in Tibet.

The emigre organisation claims that there was a full-scale uprising in Tibet in 1959. The Chinese downsize the scale and say that the disturbances were controlled in two days with the loss of 7000 rebel lives. However, a newspaper of the Chinese PLA has said that *87 thousand rebels were killed between March and October of 1959.*

After the Dalai's exit, land reforms started. The land and assets of the landlords were distributed among the serfs. Slavery was abolished. Every writer on Tibet has been forced to admit that these measures were supported by the serfs. The extent of support decreased with the later introduction of brigades and communes.

During the cultural revolution attacks on monasteries increased and the Tibetan nobility had to face the storm of criticism unleashed by the red guards. It is doubtful whether the proper care and flexibility required when dealing with a national minority was maintained during the cultural revolution. The emigre organisation claims that 92 thousand Tibetans died during the "struggle for rectification" and another lakh and 73 thousand died in jails and labour camps. While so much may not be factually correct, Hu Yao Bang, General Secretary of the Chinese party observed in 1980 that even after so many years Tibetans were very poor, in some cases even poorer than in 1950. His advice was to reduce the number of Han Chinese in Tibet. Those who remained should learn Tibetan. It is well-known that he fell from power in Beijing shortly afterwards.

After defeating the cultural revolution, Deng Hsiao Ping started off in Tibet with a lighter touch. Some damaged monasteries were allowed repairs. Permission was granted for sending more than one fact-finding mission to Tibet on behalf of the Dalai Lama. The enthusiasm with which the Tibetan people met

the missions made clear their dissatisfaction with Chinese rule. 1986-88 were years of demons-trations.

Beijing returned to the path of arrests, firing and oppression. On the other hand, slogans began to be heard calling for Tibetan independence in the protest rallies. Finally Hu Jin Tao arrived as party secretary in Tibet, and put down dissent with an iron fist. Soldiers killed 70 people in two days, and, in March, 1989, Martial Law was proclaimed in Tibet for the second time. This Hu Jin Tao is now President of China.

There were 150 demonstrations, big and small, between 1987 and 1992.

AN OPPRESSED NATIONALITY

Beijing recognises the Tibetans as a separate nationality. When the agreement was signed in 1951, Mao had said, "For over hundred years, the various nationalities of China were not united. In particular, there was disunity between the Han people and the Tibetan people. This was the result of the rule of the reactionary Manchu government and the Chiang Kai-shek government as well as the result of imperialist provocation and sowing of dissension."

Whether a minority nationality is oppressed or not can best be tested by checking if they are able to practise their language and culture, freely, happily and with honour. Formally, Chinese law has given every minority nationality the right to learn and use its native language. The 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy gives minority nationalities 'freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and ... to preserve [their] own customs.' It also instructs local governments that '[s]chools where most of the students come from minority nationalities should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages as the media of instruction.'

In fact, however, Tibetan is the medium of instruction in only a few primary schools in Tibet. In many primary schools and nearly all secondary schools, the medium of instruction is Chinese, although there are separate classes for Tibetans to learn the Tibetan language. Now, because Chinese is the medium of instruction in secondary and high schools, willy-nilly Tibetan children must learn Chinese at the primary level. Since 1996, state schools have been directed to adopt Chinese as the medium of instruction from grade one. Private schools and monastic schools are being shut off or taken over, further restricting the scope of a Tibetan education. The Tibet Justice Centre who made this survey of education admit, however, that more children are now getting the benefits of education, skewed as it may be, because in old Tibet there were only monastic schools.

There is discrimination against the Tibetan language and culture. Chinese students enjoy greater amenities and facilities at schools. The wearing of Tibetan clothes and religious ornaments, the singing of Tibetan songs are discouraged and even prohibited, the penalty ranging from ridicule to punishment. Tibetan history is not taught, except in secret, and Tibetan history and culture are referred to as appendages of an inferior people. In 1996, a Tibetan musicologist was arrested and punished with 18 years imprisonment while he was recording traditional Tibetan songs and dances on video.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Infant mortality rates in Tibet are 3 times those for China as a whole (ICJ). Malnutrition is affecting the growth, including the growth of mental abilities, of

half of Tibet's children (New England Journal of Medicine). Life expectancy is less than 60 years in Tibet, the lowest among all 18 principal minorities of China. According to government sources, there are two doctors and health workers per village in China as a whole. In Tibet, there is one per two villages, the lowest among all Chinese provinces. In China, as a whole, there are 85-95 hospital beds per thousand people. In Tibet the figure is 6-22.

There has been a running campaign against Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. At present, the police are arresting anyone found with a picture or a poster of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama being the head of the Tibetan Buddhists, such draconian measures amount to restriction on religious freedom.

If a Tibetan speaks in favour of self-determination or the Dalai, prints or distributes leaflets, participates in peaceful demonstration, or talks to foreigners, he is arrested for "counter-revolutionary" activity. In 1994, according to Amnesty International estimates, there were 628 political prisoners in Tibet, including 182 women and 45 children. Every year there are new arrests for dissenting opinion or speech. The arrested range from lamas to children. From 1994 it is a crime to show the Dalai's picture. Now, one cannot even keep a picture. The search for counter-revolutionaries is wide-spread, even "neighbourhood committees" and "work units" playing roles as spies.

Apart from direct arrest, security forces take away people and then they remain "missing". This is common, especially for political dissenters.

There is physical torture: electric shock from rods, assault with iron rods, rifle butts and nail-studded sticks, branding with a red-hot shovel, scalding by boiling water, hanging from the ceiling upside down or suspended by the thumbs, restriction in chains, kicks from boots, attacks by savage dogs, exposure to extreme heat and cold, long, laborious physical "exercise", prolonged solitary confinement, sexual abuse, threats to torture and kill - what depravity of state terror does not occur in the list?

Apart from police custody and jails, people are confined in camps with the declared aim of "reform through labour" or "re-education through labour". These camps have deplorable food, living quarters, and medical services.

The Tibetans are an oppressed national minority.

The extent to which the disturbances spread this time prove that resentment runs deep under the surface of the Tibetan mind. *The Times* of London reported that at one stage (April 6), the 52nd and the 55th divisions of the Chinese army were sent to pacify Tibet. Apart from Lhasa, the pacification covered quite a few villages and more than a hundred monasteries and temples. Hundreds of check posts had to be set up.

The results of war and diplomacy of an era when India, China and Tibet were dominated by colonial powers, warlords and kings need not be permanently binding on the present inhabitants of these lands. The point is the Tibetans are a minority nationality and their right to self-determination includes independence. The Tibetans are victims of discrimination and political oppression. So, they can legitimately wish to include independence in the agenda. Such a wish is not unjustified and cannot be ruled out by raising the bogey of an imperialist conspiracy to dismember China. Political forces, including some of the Left, in placing the integrity of the present Chinese state above the aspirations of the

Tibetan people, are actually denying the right of self-determination of the Tibetan people.

It is up to Beijing to prove to the Tibetan people that they would be better off within the present union with China. If Beijing continues with its policy of discrimination and suppression of dissent, the discontent of the Tibetan people might lead to a full scale fight for national liberation. It is quite possible that such a process will throw up a new set of leaders of the people unconnected with the old feudal regime and US trouble-mongers.

The "national" parties, and even sections of the Left, have found a way of escaping the problem posed by Tibet. They say that they don't want to interfere in the internal affairs of China. However, the minute a nationality wishes to develop as a separate nation, the problem is no longer an internal one.

Moreover, it must be declared that human rights issue knows no frontier. Wherever may human right be curtailed, it diminishes humankind as a whole, and so the people of the whole world have the right to criticise such curtailment and protest against it. From the Tien An Men square shootings to today's Tibet, the Chinese government has made it clear that they don't give two hoots for human rights. So, they must face the indignation of the whole world.

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