

# Tibet : Myth and Reality

**Dimple  
Jogin**

*[Progressive Indians have always been very vocal in supporting national liberation movements throughout the world from Palestine to Vietnam and in recent years the struggle of the Iraqi people against US imperialism. On the question of the liberation of Tibet—an epic struggle underway right at their doorstep—they have always maintained a curious and somewhat shameful silence. They have their reasons for it of course—and it is these myths that this brief article— abridged from a longer paper on the subject— seeks to dispel.]*

**Myth :** The intervention on Tibet was done for the liberation of the people there who were miserable slaves and serfs under a theocratic dictatorship of the Buddhist Lama-ism.

**Reality :** Throughout history, whenever a powerful empire/nation state vanquishes a weaker one, a series of myths are created based on half-truths and ignorance of the world. When British colonised India, or US does it in Iraq, it is always in the name of liberating the people who are suffering a despotic and reactionary rule. Should it not be the principle to pay special attention to listen to the dominated? Does one not need to go beyond the 'facts' given by the Government of India when it comes to Kashmir, Nagaland, North-east, or even in Singur and Nandigram? What can one learn from the collapse of the Russian empire? Lenin and the Communist Party of Russia claimed that they too had liberated the people when they were, in fact, annexing the colonies of Czar (after 1919). Then they kept claiming that those people were all so happy and developing under the virtual paradise of USSR. What happened after 50 years of living in this 'paradise'? One fine morning the world found that the people of the non-Russian republics were so angry all this while. They violently broke out of the 'great socialist family' when they got a bit of democracy under *Glasnost*. What is popular stand when both the governments of India and Pakistan refuse referendum in Kashmir, refuse to allow the people there to choose freedom if they want? Should one believe CPM media spinner like N Ram when they say that (no referendum is needed in Tibet), as the people are so happy under the Chinese rule? If this is indeed true, why the Communist Party of China (CPC) does not give the right to dissent to Tibetans, organise a referendum with international observers and thereby 'defeat the splitters' once and for all? Didn't this type of admirers of Super Power States said the same thing throughout the Soviet era till the day it fell apart like a house of cards, exposing all the lies some of progressives had staunchly believed?

Also, listening to the Tibetan refugees, most of who were toiling peasants and pastoral people in old Tibet, one gets a picture that is different from what is told to the world by their Chinese masters. Scholars who are not admirers of Chinese 'communism' have also given a different view of pre-colonial Tibetan society and life. For instance, China claims that brutal corporal punishment was the daily fare of 'serfs' in old Tibet. A reliable index of violence and repression state uses to squeeze the people is the size of the armed forces and the prison. Old Tibet had almost no army. A one-hundred-strong army could always capture the Potala Palace - the seat of the Dalai Lama. It did not have any elaborate prison system.

There was hardly any execution in its history. Tibet today has many times more prisoners/executions and military presence than it had throughout its history!

**Myth :** China being under the dictatorship of a communist party cannot colonise any country like the western imperialists or non-communist State of India.

**Reality :** If a party calls itself Communist or Marxist or democratic and does something that the victims claim to be authoritarian and oppressive, should one examine the evidence or pre-judge? Can one say the victims are lying because 'a comrade cannot do such things?' Some people keep arguing; "because CPM is a communist party, it cannot be doing all those terrible things in Singur and Nandigram that some are claiming. The facts narrated by CPM must be the correct ones and those by the opposition are lies and untruth. Aren't these people, the dissidents Trinamool, BJP communalists and reactionaries and Naxalites?"

Today people are wiser. A party should not be judged on the basis of what it claims to be—Marxist or democratic or whatever. Even if it has fought against oppression somewhere at some time, it does not mean that it cannot indulge in oppressive acts elsewhere.

Look at the anti-colonial struggle that came to power in India represented by Congress. Along with Pakistan, its first act was to colonise Kashmir. Then came Nagaland. The CPM struggled against the exploitation and degeneration of Congress and came to power in West Bengal (in a CPM-led United Front) in 1967. Its first act was to unleash State terror on the peasants of Naxalbari. From then till Singur and Nandigram have people not seen enough?

In fact, all anti-oppression struggles, when they come to power, turn into oppressors somewhere at some level. It is difficult to find exceptions to this. All share the same human propensity to get distorted by power-over-others. American ruling class came to power by overthrowing the colonial rule of the British imperialism. Today the difference between the rhetoric and reality whether in the Communist rule in West Bengal or in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution in 1919 is clear. Why imagine the people who rule China to be so different from other humans?

**Myth :** How can one support a movement led by a religious autocrat, the Dalai Lama?

**Reality :** It's better to learn from the Tibetan movement. It is not organised by a single party, a central committee but bossed over by the Dalai Lama and his religious cadres. The reality is different.

The largest (25,000 membership) political organisation of Tibetan independence movement is TYC (Tibetan Youth Congress). They respect the Dalai Lama but are autonomous. Thus, recently the Dalai Lama climbed down from his earlier stand of full independence. He took the new stand of calling for an autonomous Tibet but within China's borders. Many old Tibetans having too much faith on the Dalai Lama felt that TYC should comply with the shift. But TYC never budged from its stand of full independence.

Regarding religion their stand is quite unambiguous. They declare, "TYC does not subscribe to ... any particular religion or religious sect."

US did not even know much about Tibet till 1956. Then they did begin to support. When the Dalai Lama decided to escape from Tibet, they used the clandestine radio link set up by CIA to inform the US and Indian government about their decision and request for help when they would arrive in India

Then there are more than 400 Tibet support groups (TSGs) all over the world who constitute a large body of the struggle. The Friends Of Tibet (FOT) is one such network in India. Made up of Tibetans and non-Tibetans, these are really multi-coloured. People of all kinds of social, political, religious beliefs work together in loose, coordinated, democratic, horizontalist ways. These are quite independent of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism though many of the volunteers are interested in and respectful to these.

Finally, does one find the Dalai trying to perpetuate the traditional power and influence he had on Tibetans, his historical legacy?

Far from it. He broke the old tradition in many ways. Earlier, it was the tradition of two-in-one fusion of religious/ideological, political, administrative role of Dalai Lama. Today, religion and religious organisations have been separated from politics, State and governance. Parties, elections, Parliament run government, a highly democratic constitution and laws—is the model that is being pursued.

Today any observer of the Tibetan scene sees something unusual. Here was a so-called dictatorship that was deeply rooted in the Tibetan mind and culture. The exile situation made this dependency of the Tibetan refugees on authority even deeper. But here the 'dictator' is seriously pushing to devolve and has taken big steps towards it.

Creating a large, high quality democratic and rational education system (where every Tibetan child gets to study) separate in all ways from the Buddhist monastery was another act that the Dalai Lama initiated.

Myth : Tibetan independence is an issue organised by US imperialism and CIA.

Reality : As stated earlier US State and CIA did not even know much about Tibet till 1956. The Dalai Lama and his policy advisory body took all their decisions independently and often this would take CIA by surprise.

Slowly, after 1959, CIA helped a group of Tibetans who wanted to fight the Chinese in a guerrilla war. This was done against the wishes of the Dalai Lama. Then too CIA's mandate was not to try to overthrow the Chinese rule. Their orders and motives were to collect good intelligence from within CPC, and to harass the PLA, keep it busy in Tibet to some extent. (The Tibetan guerrillas thought they were fighting for independence). It was a small operation parallel to, independent from and quite marginal to the main Tibetan struggle in general.

Then came 1969.

There began a complete reversal of US policy regarding China and Tibet. Led by the far seeing super strategist Henry Kissinger, US planned a new alliance in Asia. China, at that time regarded USSR as its main enemy. So did the US!

This new doctrine planned to break the old communist world, the soviet sphere of influence. A new anti-Soviet sphere of influence in Asia led by and based upon US-China partnership was planned. Pakistan, North Korea, all countries that could be persuaded were to be brought together.

At the same time, US business saw China as a vast potential 'largest store of cheap and docile labour and market in the world'.

China agreed but wanted some confidence building measures from the US State :

- \* Stop supporting Tibet
- \* Stop supporting the government in Taiwan
- \* Recognise PRC, Support PRC in its rightful role as a big power in UN Security Council and every global body that US manipulates.

US complied on a top priority basis. CIA was ordered in 1969 to dump the Tibet support with immediate effect, without any grace period. Accordingly, CIA told their Tibetan friends, "Sorry we stop here, orders from above". The Tibetan guerrillas were horrified and felt betrayed. They could not operate on their own. Also, this new policy of the US meant that Nepal that was allowing Tibetans to operate from within its borders would no more do so. The Dalai Lama was not for it (the armed resistance) from the beginning. So it meant the end to guerrilla resistance. Even the CIA officers involved were unhappy. This comes out in the film : *Shadow Circus—the CIA in Tibet* (ST Circus was the code name of the CIA project in Tibet). In this film the CIA officers, long after their retirement, tell every detail of the CIA project from its beginning to end.

It is true that Indian record in supporting the struggle for autonomy of the people of North East, Kashmir, or Sikkim has been really poor. Instead of seeing their support in a competitive way with Tibet, one should explore why it is difficult to 'see' each of them, examine their connection and consider how one can support better.

Myth : Many friends say; "What is so special about Tibet? Indian government does the same in Kashmir or North-east. One should first support them."

Reality : Yes, it is true that Indian State has acted in an imperialist/chauvinistic way whenever it had the need or opportunity. The worst has been the suppression of the independence movement of the Naga people. They were promised referendum and possible separation if they wanted it before Independence (1947). But afterward, they were denied it. After all peaceful attempts by Naga people were thwarted, they took the path of armed resistance in the early 1950s. Indian military hit back with full force. A long drawn brutal suppression ensued. This is possibly the goriest and most sordid chapter in Indian history after 1947. Only in late 1990s did ceasefire take place. Possibly what was more shameful to Indian progressives was their own failure to support the Naga people. □□□