

A Moment of Truth

To REBEL IS JUSTIFIED. BUT THIS POPULAR MAOIST DICTUM does not apply to the revolting monks of Tibet. The debate over the Tibet question has changed dramatically. The focus on state persecution of the religious and cultural identity of Tibetans has been supplanted by perceived threats to Chinese sovereignty. Any voice of dissent against the Chinese authoritarianism in relation to Tibet is being projected as a conspiracy to destabilise China. Tragically enough, the Chinese authoritarianism thrives with the passivity of the governed. As things are this passivity cannot be taken for granted. The recent flare-up in Lhasa illustrates among other things that discontent among Tibetans against Chinese rule is deep rooted and, the demand for right to self-determination to the point of cessation cannot be glossed over by erecting a bamboo curtain. The general line of propaganda by Beijing against the Tibetans aspiring for freedom and democracy, as it appears in the Chinese media, from time to time, is that 'serfs and slaves who accounted for 95 of the population of Tibet, had no basic human rights or freedom' under the lamacracy in the old days. But freedom they enjoy under the Chinese baton is no better than 'freedom' the colonised have under colonial masters.

There is a paradox in the ethnic perception by the so-called international community. After years of violence and diplomatic wrangling the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo on February 17, declared independence and within a day America recognised the new-born independent state while Britain just followed the suite. And it is a matter of time that Germany, France, Italy and Australia will recognise Kosovo's sovereignty. But Tibet is a different issue. Tibetans cannot raise the issue of self-determination, not to speak of independence, because it contradicts the well orchestrated Chinese notion that at no point of time Tibet had any independent status. But the reverse is true. Tibet had all along enjoyed a kind of semi-independent existence despite Beijing's loose control over Lhasa.

The way Tibetans have been marginalised in their own homeland over the years has no parallel in history. Maybe it has a close similarity to what is happening in India's north-eastern state of Tripura where migrant Bengalis from erstwhile East Bengal, seem to have outnumbered local Tiparas, endangering the very survival of original inhabitants. The patent assertion by the Dalai Lama that China is out to destroy Tibet's cultural distinctiveness and change the demographic balance to the disadvantage of Tibetans, cannot generate required momentum anymore to galvanise Tibetan independence movement. The reality is that the Dalai Lama is a mellowed person today and he is too willing to make a compromise deal with the Chinese government. The irony is that despite his denouncement of violence the Chinese premier accused the Dalai Lama of fomenting recent violent outbursts in Lhasa and elsewhere. In truth the Lama went to the extent of quitting the office of the Tibetan government in exile, in case of continuing violence, hopefully to reiterate his stand that he is no longer in favour of independent Tibet.

To blame it on the Dalai Lama for the current Trumoil in Tibet may be a deliberate Chinese ploy to create pressure on the Lama. Also, to bracket Taiwan

with Tibet is motivated. After all Taiwan enjoys a unique status quo—no reunification with China but no formal independence either. It is not really the case with Tibet. Strangely, China's military crackdown in which more than one hundred rebels died was hailed as a people's war in the Chinese media. A war it was. But it was a war against the Tibetan people.

Young Tibetans who were born and brought up in foreign countries mainly in refugee camps, are losing faith in the Dalai's wavering approach to the Tibetan question. They are not interested in becoming a part of Chinese culture, albeit the Dalai Lama thinks the Han Chinese and Tibetans can live together harmoniously. True, the Tibetans can have that privilege only by losing the Tibetan identity. Though the Chinese authorities do not lose a single opportunity to condemn lamaracy but they are no less enthusiastic to champion Lama-oriented theocracy when it suits their political interests.

So the Panchen Lama, being an official Tibetan institution endorsed by Beijing, came down heavily on the monks who rebelled, to assert Chinese authority. Not that the Chinese communists are going to abolish the Panchen Lama establishment as a measure to disown the old order. They won't be averse to the idea of integrating the institution of Dalai Lama as well, with the system if it serves their purpose. A titular head in the Potala Place is no problem for the Chinese.

For the Tibetans the very Tibetan issue is at a crossroads because their strategy to articulate Tibetan aspirations around their spiritual and religious head—the Dalai—seems to be crumbling. □□