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CHAPTER 3

India, Tibet and China

Tibet is India's biggest geographical neighbour, whether under Chinese control or otherwise. The Indo-Tibetan border begins in the eastern most tip of India in Arunachal Pradesh and ends in the icy heights of the Karakoram Range. Tibet's influence is seen all over India's Himalayan region where the Tibetan strain of Mahayana Buddhism predominates. There are over 120 Buddhist monasteries in India's Himalayan region where the Dalai Lama is venerated as the head of the faith. The languages of Ladakh, Sikkim and Bhutan are variants of Tibetan. The great gompas of Thigse, Shey, Rumtek or Tawang are architecturally similar to the gompas of Tibet and what happens inside them is just the same.

India's ecclesiastical links with Tibet are well established. While Tibet has a distinct identity–its own religion, language, and history–in their fabric of civilization, the Tibetans borrowed their impulses from India. In sum, the ties between India and Tibet were spiritual bonds that go back almost two millennia,

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which were essentially of a non-military and non-political character, albeit with nominal overland commerce.[1] As Nehru remarked, 'Tibet, culturally speaking, is an offshoot of India.'[2] This is in direct contrast to Chinese influence in the temporal sphere.

Buddhism went to Tibet from India and with it went the best impulses of India's traditions, philosophy and folklore. Even the Tibetan script is derived from ancient Pali which was the dominant language of upper India during the period of Gautama Buddha and the great Mauryan and Magadh kingdoms. The scripts of Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Telugu and Kannada are also derived from Pali. But it is Tibetan that is closest to Pali. Thus, today it is the countless Tibetan Buddhist monks in India who are best placed to interpret the golden age of Bharat, preserved in the manuscripts and etchings of the period to the people of India. Indeed, the present Dalai Lama has called Tibet 'a child of the Indian civilization'.[3] The holiest lake and mountain of the Hindu folklore and tradition, the abode of Shiva, lies in Tibet and even today the *parikramas* of Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash are the highest ritual duties a Hindu can perform in one lifetime, or for that matter even in several. It is not coincidental that Tibetans also consider a *kora* or circumambulation of Manasarovar and Kailash as a religious duty.

Since the eleventh century, however, until the advent of British rule in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, India's ties with Tibet suffered seriously. The Mongol invasions in the north, the great revival of Hinduism led by the first Shankaracharya followed later by the advent of Islam in India and the virtual eclipse of Buddhism, greatly tempered Indo-Tibetan cultural links.

However much Tibet may have drawn from India and however close it may have been to India, not just geographically but spiritually, Tibet has always been a remote and exotic land to most Indians. This remoteness is almost entirely due to geography, for Tibet is separated from India by the tallest and lengthiest mountain range in the world impervious to only the

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hardiest and determined. Thus, while spiritually and geographically closest to India, Tibet has been historically closer to China and even Mongolia, because the lie of the land made it naturally contiguous with fewer geographical barriers.

Throughout its long history, the easy and continued Tibetan political intercourse with China and Mongolia determined its politics and present situation. There were even many times in history when Tibetans conquered China and imposed their will upon them. The earliest of these was when Trisong Detsen seized Changan (now Xian) and appointed a new Emperor. In 1642 the fifth Dalai Lama sallied forth to Peking to demand that the Ming Emperor recognize Tibetan sovereignty and independence, which he did. But at other times the Mongols, Manchu's and Hans dominated and ruled Tibet. Like Mongolia and Manchuria, Tibet was not one of the lesser partners in the long saga of China's historical evolution. Today, Tibet is a part of China, but Tibet nevertheless is still a distinct nation even if it is no longer a separate state. That China now extends into Tibet is why it is India's neighbour in a de facto and possibly even de jure sense, but it is still Tibet that is India's true neighbour.

It is also true that the dispute over the Tawang Tract that has flared up once again was due to the November 2006 statement of the former Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi. While it is true that China officially disputes the whole of Arunachal Pradesh, it is also well understood that their focus is upon the Tawang Tract which India occupied in 1951, at about the same time Communist China occupied Tibet.

The Chinese have based their specific claim on the territory on the premise that Tawang was administered from Lhasa, and the contiguous areas owed allegiance to the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet. Then the Chinese must also consider this. Sikkim in the nineteenth century was a vassal of Tibet and Darjeeling was forcibly taken from it by the British! By extending this logic could they realistically stake a claim for Sikkim and Darjeeling? Of course not. It would be preposterous. History has moved on. Times have changed. For the twenty-first

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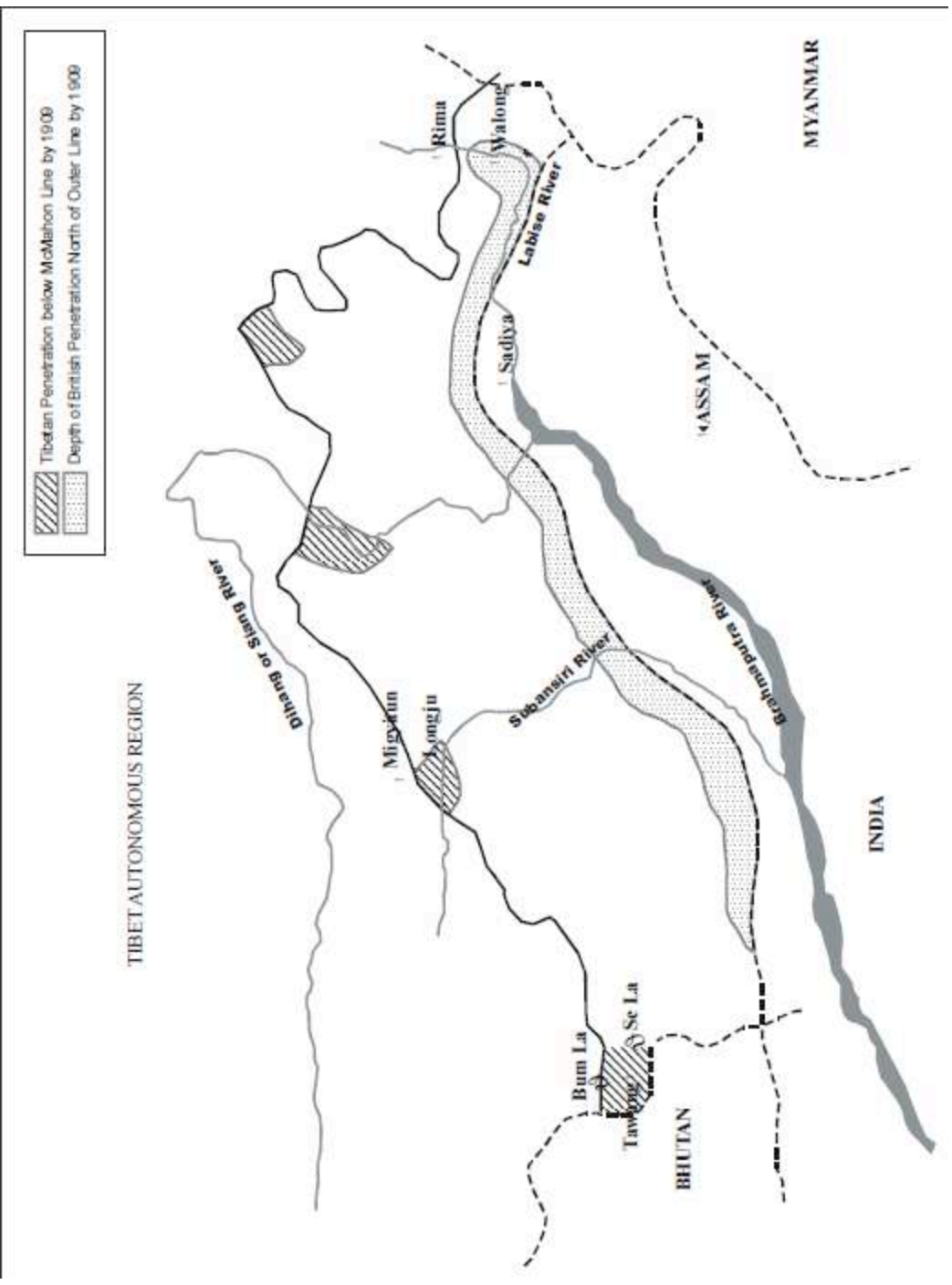

Map 4: Extent of British and Tibetan penetration into the tribal areas of the Assam Himalaya by 1909)

SOURCE: Based on a map from Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970, p. 64.

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century to be stable, twentieth century borders must be stable, whatever be our national yearnings.

At the crux of this issue, lies the larger question of the national identities of the two nations and when and how they evolved. The great Indian empires of the Mauryans, Guptas and Mughals spanned from Afghanistan to Bengal well short of the Brahmaputra, but did not go very much below the Godavari in the south. The Imperial India of the British incorporated all of today's India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but had no Afghanistan, not for want of trying. It was the British who for the first time brought Assam into India in 1826 when they defeated Burma (Myanmar) and formalized the annexation with the Treaty of Yandabo. It was only in 1886 that the British first forayed out of the Brahmaputra Valley when they sent out a punitive expedition into the Lohit Valley in pursuit of marauding tribesmen, who began raiding the new tea gardens. Apparently, the area was neither under Chinese nor Tibetan control for there were no protests either from the Dalai Lama or the Chinese Amban in Lhasa (see Map 4). The British stayed put.

Throughout the course of the nineteenth century the British in India had made persistent efforts to open up Tibet for commerce. They endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to deal with the Dalai Lama's government, and failing that, through the intermediacy of Manchu China. [4] In the extreme western part of Tibet, British interest in *pashm*, used to make fine cashmere wool, led to the construction of the Hindustan-Tibet road between 1850 and 1858. Designed primarily to improve trade, the road went from the plains of India through Simla, the summer capital, before passing through Bashahr and terminating at Shipki on the Tibetan border. [5]

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the race to be first into Lhasa became the greatest challenge for explorers and adventurers. Not the least among these were the spies of the Survey of India, the legendary pundits. The most renowned of these was Sarat Chandra Das whose books on Tibet are still avidly read. As the adventurers, often military officers

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masquerading as explorers, began visiting Tibet, the British in India began worrying. Reports that the most well-known of Czarist Russia's military explorers, Col. Grombchevsky, was sighted in Tibet, had made Lord Curzon the Governor-General of India, most worried. In 1903 Curzon decided to send a military expedition into Tibet led by Grombchevsky's old antagonist, Col. Francis Younghusband. A mixed brigade of Gurkha and British battalions went over the Nathu La into the Chumbi Valley and advanced unhindered till Xigatse. A Tibetan military force met them there, but offered what can only be described as passive resistance. Not a shot was fired back, as the British Indian troops rained bullets on them. It was a forerunner to Jallianwalla Bagh. From Xigatse, Younghusband made a leisurely march into Lhasa. The Chinese Amban, whose ability to function efficiently had been undermined by the collapsing Qing Dynasty, sent out his personal guard to escort Younghusband into the city.

The British got the Tibetans to agree to end their isolation, having extracted trade concessions and a permanent British military presence in the Chumbi Valley, withdrew in 1904. But broader diplomatic considerations of the British Empire meant much of Younghusband's gains were repudiated by Whitehall. The 1906 Anglo-Chinese Adhesion Agreement largely restored the Amban's authority over Tibet and the British bound themselves to non-interference in Tibet's internal affairs. Further, by the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, Britain and Russia agreed to leave Tibet 'in that state of isolation from which, till recently, she has shown no intention to depart'. By 1908, British troops had withdrawn from the Chumbi Valley. [6]

As Alastair Lamb notes, 'the most apparent result of the Younghusband Mission, which undermined the authority of the Dalai Lama, was to lay Tibet open to a reassertion of Chinese authority'. This began almost immediately after the withdrawal of Younghusband from Lhasa, when anti-Chinese risings in Eastern Tibet gave rise to strong and effective Chinese countermeasures. [7]

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After this short period of Chinese consolidation, however, Tibet would emerge as a de facto independent state with the collapse of the Manchu Dynasty in 1912. In 1913, the Tibetans declared independence after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of a Republic in China under Sun Yat-sen. They attacked and drove the Chinese garrisons in Tibet into India over the Nathu La. In 1913 the British also convened the Simla Conference to delimit the India-Tibet border. The British proposed the 1914 McMahon Line, as we know it. The Tibetans accepted it. The Chinese Amban initialed the agreement under protest. But his protest seemed mostly about the British negotiating directly with Tibet as a sovereign state and not over the McMahon Line as such. [8]

Things moved on then. In 1935 at the insistence of Sir Olaf Caroe, ICS, then Deputy Secretary in the Foreign Department, the McMahon Line was notified. In 1944, J.P. Mills, ICS, established the British Indian administration in NEFA, but excluding Tawang, which continued to be administered by the Lhasa appointed head Lama at Tawang, despite the fact that it lay well below the McMahon Line. This was largely because Henry Twynam, the Governor of Assam lost his nerve and did not want to provoke the Tibetans. In 1947, the Dalai Lama sent newly independent India a note laying claim to some districts in NEFA.

On 7 October 1950 the Chinese attacked the Tibetans at seven places on their frontier and made known their intention of reasserting control over all of Tibet. As if in response, on 16 February 1951, Major Relangnao 'Bob' Khating, IFAS, raised the India tricolor in Tawang and took over the administration of the tract. The point of this narration is to bring home the fact that India's claim over Arunachal Pradesh does not rest on any great historical tradition. We are there because the British went there. But then the Chinese too have no basis whatsoever to stake a claim, besides a few dreamy cartographic enlargements of the notion of China among some of the hangers-on in the Qing Emperor's court.

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The view from the Chinese side about what exactly constitutes China is no less confused. Apparently like the British, the Manchu's who ruled China from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, had a policy of staking claim to the lands that lay ahead of their frontiers in order to provide themselves with military buffers. However, as a leading Chinese historian, Ge Jianxiong, Director of the Institute of Chinese Historical Geography at Fudan University in Shanghai and a veteran of official history textbook advisory committees has recently noted in an article titled 'How big was ancient China?' published in *China Review*, that to claim that the ancient Buddhist kingdom 'has *always* been a part of China' would be a 'defiance of history'.[9] In the same article Ge Jianxiong elaborates: 'to claim that Tibet has always been a part of China since the Tang Dynasty; the fact that the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau subsequently became a part of the Chinese dynasties does not substantiate such a claim'. Ge also notes that prior to 1912, when the Republic of China was established, the idea of China was not clearly conceptualized. Even during the late Qing period (Manchu) the term China would, on occasion, refer to the Qing state including all the territory that fell within the boundaries of the Qing Empire. At other times it would be taken to refer to only the eighteen interior provinces excluding Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang.

Professor Ge further adds that the notions of 'Greater China' were based entirely on the 'one-sided views of Qing court records that were written for the courts self-aggrandizement'. Ge criticizes those who feel that the more they exaggerate the territory of historical China the more 'patriotic' they are. In this context we would like to recall a recent conversation Mohan Guruswamy had with the Sun Yuxi, then China's envoy to India. Ambassador Sun said that while he was soundly castigated in India for his unintended comment, he gained a major constituency in China, as there are elements in the politico-military hierarchy who do not wish any compromise with India. The mandarins in the Beijing would do well to take heed to Ge

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Jianxiong's advice: 'If China really wishes to rise peacefully and be on solid footing in the future, we must understand the sum of our history and learn from our experiences.'

Historically, Tibet's relationship with China has defied any precise definition. While Tibet never enjoyed 'independence' as the term is commonly understood, it was also never an 'integral part' of the mainland. But there is a well established Chinese historical tradition, namely, the primacy over inner Asia and its defence, as being integral to the security of China itself. This would largely explain the various institutional devices that Beijing's rulers forged, to maintain control over these vast regions. Since, over the centuries, the periphery had served as a springboard for invasions into the mainland, Chinese rulers have been exceptionally diligent in their efforts to control the periphery.

Tibet's links with China go back to the mid-seventh century, when a Tibetan ruler married a Han princess of the ruling Tang Dynasty. In its wake, came Chinese influence–in the manner of dress and mode of living. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols, whose vast empire embraced China and Tibet, established close links with Tibet's Lamas, after accepting their faith. The Ming Dynasty, which succeeded the Mongols, was relatively weak and thus between 1566 and 1644 political relations between Beijing and Lhasa were virtually non-existent.[10]

It was only under the Manchu's (Qing Dynasty, 1644-1912), that the relationship evolved further. But in essence it was a political relationship, not one with the Han people. After 1712, when Manchu armies of the Qing Dynasty marched into Tibet, Chinese power dominated all its border regions. Tibet's treaties with foreign powers, especially those of 1856 and 1904, were concluded in the wake of military debacles inflicted first by the Gurkhas, and then by the British under Francis Younghusband. 'The relationship between Tibet and (Qing) China was that of priest and patron and was not based on the subordination of one to the other', according to the thirteenth Dalai Lama. 'The

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pattern was that of the traditional *guru-chela* relationship; the lay prince, buttressing the authority of the high priest, who in turn extended him spiritual support'. [11]

The office of the Amban was first introduced by Beijing in 1728, by which time Manchu armies had stabilized Tibet from Mongol intruders. From an initial garrison of 2,000 men, it was later agreed that 100 Chinese soldiers would remain stationed at Lhasa. The Amban was essentially an ambassador appointed to look after Manchu interests, and to protect the Dalai Lama on behalf of the Emperor. The Amban mission lasted until 1912.

In 1788 the Gurkhas attacked Tibet. The Dalai Lama appealed to the Qing emperor for military assist ance. By 1792, Chinese forces had reached central Tibet and decisively pushed back the Gurkhas into Kathmandu. The Chinese took the opportunity, afforded by their intervention to strengthen their control over Tibet, including devising a new method of selection of the Dalai Lama. The Tibetans agreed to the 'Golden Urn' formula. After 1792, China had acquired more power in Tibet than it had ever possessed before. [12] The 1792 Chinese expeditionary force was the fifth army the Qing emperor had sent to Tibet in the eighteenth century. [13]

Thus, in 1792, the Emperor issued a 29-point decree which tightened Chinese control over Tibet. It strengthened the powers of the Ambans, who were in theory put at par with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas and given authority over financial, diplomatic and trade affairs. It also outlined a new method to select both the Dalai and Panchen Lama by means of a lottery administered by the Amban in Lhasa. In this lottery the names of the competing candidates were written on folded slips of paper which were placed in a golden urn. The tenth, eleventh and twelfth Dalai Lamas were selected by the golden urn method. [14] The Chinese now interpret this as a right to have a say in the choice of the next Dalai Lama. They have already chosen a Panchen Lama. The ninth, thirteen, and fourteenth Dalai Lamas, however, were selected by the previous incarnation's entourage with the selection being approved after the fact by Beijing.

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In May 1841, the Dogra General Zorawar Singh invaded Western Tibet and captured Taklakot by September. The Amban at Lhasa, Meng Pao, reported: 'On my arrival at Taklakot a force of only about 1000 local troops could be mustered, which was divided and stationed as guards at different posts. A guard post was quickly established at a strategic pass near Taklakot to stop the invaders, but these local troops were not brave enough to fight off the Shen-Pa (Dogras) and fled at the approach of the invaders. The distance between Central Tibet and Taklakot is several thousand li . . . because of the cowardice of the local troops; our forces had to withdraw to the foot of the Tsa Mountain near the Mayum Pass. Reinforcements are essential in order to withstand these violent and unruly invaders.' [15] In December 1841, the Chinese finally responded. Chinese-Tibetan forces decisively defeated the Dogras and chased them back till Leh. Subsequently, Dogra forces counter attacked and finally defeated them in the first Battle of Chushul in August 1842.

After the October 1911 revolution, which ended the Manchu rule, the Dalai Lama repudiated all links with the Han, while the new Chinese republic sought to declare Tibet and Outer Mongolia as integral parts of China. Sun Yat-sen, and later, Chiang Kai-shek, reiterated Beijing's declarations. So did Mao within a year of his declaration of the PRC in 1949. Beijing has argued that the Dalai Lama's declaration of independence in 1912 was unilateral and it could only have been valid if accepted by the other party.

It is also pertinent to note that nineteenth century geopolitics in a sense preserved Chinese influence over Lhasa. Ironically, 'the pattern of great power rivalry worked to uphold rather than destroy China's legal claim to paramountcy, which Chinese nationalism would later translate into the more absolute concept of sovereignty'. [16] As alluded to earlier, this was a by-product of the Great Game, whereby the British upheld Chinese 'suzerainty' over Tibet to keep Russian influence at bay, while simultaneously ensuring both a degree of Tibetan autonomy and British-Indian influence in Tibet.

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Professor Ge's recent introspection is ref lective of a new dynamic in Chinese historiography within Chinese academia– that the concept of 'China' has evolved over the millennia and is not a static notion that is generally portrayed by mainland historians. And indeed, the first time that 'China' was clearly conceptualized was with the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. As mentioned earlier, even during the late Qing period, 'China' would have sometimes been referred to as only the '18 Interior Provinces' excluding Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang. Thus, as Professor Ge writes, to understand the extent of ancient China's territor y, one has to identify the control of the prevailing central power at any particular period, whose political fortunes f luctuated thus, so did the frontiers of China. Thus, 'to look back from the perspective of contemporary borders, China's current territory contains many areas that form the perspective of eighth century political control, which were independent of the authority of the Tang Court (including Tibet)'.

In sum, it is imperative to distinguish between 'China Proper' and what was variously called 'Outer China' or the 'Chinese dependencies'. 'China Proper' referred to those areas that were directly controlled by the central administrative bureaucracy. For most of the Qing Dynasty, it consisted of the 18 provinces primarily populated by Han Chinese. In contrast, 'Outer China' or the 'dependencies' referred to other areas, primarily peopled by ethnic minorities, that were under the suzerainty of the Chinese state and whose subordination was ensured by force, if necessary. During the Qing, these included Manchuria, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan and Tibet. [17]

The last years of the Qing Dynasty is the most recent example of territorial disintegration in the historical cycle of expansion and contraction of China's historical frontiers. And by 1912 this process of territorial disintegration ultimately led to de facto independence for Tibet, which only after the Communists had consolidated central control by 1949 was forcibly compelled to re-unite with 'China Proper', only this time (after 1951) on terms that had been impossible earlier.

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Article 3 of the 1954 Chinese Constitution declared China to be 'a single multinational state' of which the national autonomous regions were 'inalienable parts'. This position has remained unchanged in the later Constitutions of 1975 and 1982. In May 1991, Prime Minister Li Peng clarified that 'we have only one fundamental principle, namely, Tibet is an inalienable part of China. On this fundamental issue, there is no room for haggling. . . . All matters except "Tibetan independence" can be discussed.' [18]

From China's contemporary perspective, the economic integration of Tibet with mainland China and indeed Tibet's own economic rejuvenation since 1980, [19] aided since July 2006, when Beijing completed a 1,956-km railway line linking Lhasa to Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, suggests that Chinese control over TAR is perhaps more robust than in the past. Suffice it to say, such developments, which are consistent with China's larger development strategy for its western provinces, are likely to placate Beijing's concerns over Tibet, and thus, perhaps augurs well for enhanced Sino-Indian ties in a hitherto complex triangular relationship.

In 2000, N. Ram, a noted Indian journalist, after a visit to Tibet, dispelled a long-held myth when he stated bluntly that, historically 'Tibet was a feudal serfdom. Land as well as most means of production was in the hands of the three categories of estate-owners–government officials, nobles, and upper class Lamas–who comprised merely 5 per cent of the population. The mass of the population, serfs and slaves, lived in extreme poverty, as appendages to estates owned by their masters, lacking education, health care, personal freedom, any kind of entitlement, obliged to provide unpaid labour services or *ulag*, an expansive Tibetan term for extortionate taxes.' Thus he adds, 'To ask it to remain frozen in its traditions, as romantic disillusionment with the process of modernization demands, is to be unrealistic as well as unfair to the mass of Tibetan people. For all their observable religiosity, they are as keen as people anywhere else to solve basic problems of food, clothing, shelter,

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transport, education, health, and decent work and to improve living standards as quickly as possible.' [20]

In 2007, the same journalist returned to Tibet and reported on the socio-economic development in the plateau, which by now was palpable. He writes, 'with a speeding up of the development of industry, the service sector, infrastructure, and education; with the modernization of agriculture and livestock practices; with adequate job creation; with an all-out poverty eradication effort; with an enlightened programme of environmental protection; and with scrupulous respect for the language, culture, religious beliefs and constitutionally mandated autonomy of the Tibetan people, rising China is eminently capable of achieving the all-round development of this autonomous region, which has been problematical in the past'.[21]

Today, India has by no means abandoned its historical cultural links with Tibet. In fact, India can 'rediscover these historical linkages and revitalize them in the present day context'.

Indeed, the Joint Declaration issued in New Delhi on 21 November 2006, during Hu Jintao's visit, explicitly states the significance of religion and culture in bilateral relations: 'The two sides agree to strengthen cooperation in the area of spiritual and civilizational heritage, discuss collaboration in the digitization of Buddhist manuscripts available in China, as well as the re-development of Nalanda as a major centre of learning with the establishment of an international university on the basis of regional cooperation.'

In addition, New Delhi could also revive its traditional economic ties with Tibet, an opportunity that arose again in July 2006, when the Nathu La pass was reopened as a trading route after 44 years.

NOTES

1. Parshotam Mehra, *Essays in Frontier History: India, China, and the Disputed Border*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 110.

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2. John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 41.
3. Mehra, *Essays in Frontier History*, p. 109.
4. Ibid., pp. 107-21.
5. Derek Waller, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia*, Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.
6. Alastair Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia: The Road to Lhasa, 1767 to 1905*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960, pp. 329-30.
7. Ibid., p. 331
8. It should be noted that the 1914 Simla Convention divided Tibet into an inner and outer zone. Outer Tibet was considered for all practical purposes as part of China. Inner Tibet, which was geographically contiguous to India's northern frontiers, was accepted as effectively autonomous.
9. Claude Arpi, 'China is a 20th Century Idea', *The Pioneer*, 27 March 2007; Venkatesan Vembu, 'Tibet wasn't ours, says Chinese scholar', *www.dnaindia.com*, 22 February 2007.
10. Mehra, *Essays in Frontier History*, p. 108.
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12. Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia*, pp. 22-5.
13. Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet and the Dalai Lama*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 19.
14. Melvyn C. Goldstein,, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 44, n. 13.
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16. Garver, *Protracted Contest*, p. 35.
17. Harry Harding, 'The Concept of "Greater China": Themes, Variations and Reservations', *The China Quarterly*, No. 136, Special Issue: Greater China (December 1993), pp. 660-86.
18. N. Ram, 'The Politics of Tibet: a 2007 reality check', *The Hindu*, 5 July 2007.
19. During the period 1980-98, Tibet's GDP quadrupled. Since the 1990s, Tibet's economy has grown at close to 10 per cent.
20. N. Ram, 'Tibet–A Reality Check', *Frontline*, Vol. 17, Issue 18, 2 September 2000.
21. N. Ram, 'Tibet in the time of high economic growth', *The Hindu*, 3 July 2007.