

Feeding the Liberation Army

March 2001

On September 9, 1951, several thousand Communist troops of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Lhasa under the command of General Wang Chi-Mei. Subsequently 20,000 troops began to occupy the most strategic points on the Tibetan Plateau.

The years which followed, saw one of strangest upshots of the so-called 'liberation' of Tibet and the nascent 'eternal' friendship between India and China, the supply by India of grain for the Chinese troops stationed in Tibet. There is no doubt that the grain was intended to help sustain the Chinese Liberation Army troops. Before the arrival of the Chinese army on the Roof of the World in the early 50's, very few Tibetans had ever eaten rice; roast barley, known as *tsampa*, had been the staple food for centuries.

The liberation of Tibet was a well-planned operation and the PLA were quite well organized. For example, for the first time in Tibet, motor-vehicle, of which some were even air-lifted to reach their destinations were used by the troops. The Chinese strategy had been prepared with scientific perfection by Mao's army commander, Lui Pocheng, and Deng Xiaoping, the Political Commissar for Western China. After having forced the 17-Point Agreement on the Tibetan government in May 1951, the PLA began to consolidate their military position on the high plateau before the year was out.

The first skirmishes with the Indian troopsⁱ date from this period.

The next step for Beijing was to subdue the Indian government with a well-orchestrated propaganda of 'eternal friendship' (followed by 'brotherhood' or *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*) between the two Asian giants.

Once the military take-over of Tibet had been 'legalized' by the 17-Point Agreement, the communist plans unfolded. With very little objection from the Government of India to the take-over of Tibet, Mao wanted the supremacy of

the PLA to be established on the ground and proceeded to built motorable access roads to the new 'borders' of China.

The influx of fresh troops brought with it the first real problem in the new co-existence between the Chinese occupants and the Lhasa government. The first test arose over the availability of food. It was the most important logistical problem.

The Chinese army commanders had drafted very strict rules for the troops:

"You must obey orders. You cannot take even one needle from the masses, you must turn over to the government things acquired from the enemy."

The young Chinese soldiers had *"The Eight Things to Keep in Mind"* which included advice such as: *"You must speak gently, you must buy and sell honestly, you must return the things you borrow, you must not tease or bother females, you may not abuse prisoners of war."*ⁱⁱ

On the ground, however, the situation was different. In Tibetan government circles, one question kept recurring: "will the Chinese implement the 17-Point Agreement without disturbing the existing social and environmental balance in Tibet?" They did not have to wait long to get an answer.

Soon after its arrival in Lhasa, the military command began requisitioning food supplies for its troops and land for its army camps. It has to be pointed out that Tibet had for centuries practised sustainable development and had been self-sufficient in food. Starvation was unheard of on the Roof of the World. For the first time in its history, the arrival of the PLA produced a breakdown of the Tibetan economy and it soon became difficult for the Tibetan (and the Chinese) Government to deal with the problem.

For a few months, Lukhangwa, the courageous Tibetan Prime Minister attempted several times to raise the matter with the Chinese authorities; he argued that it was unfair to put such a burden on the Tibetan poor and that it was not necessary to keep so many troops around Lhasa. He even tried to point out that the actions of the Chinese military command were against the 17-Point Agreement. One day, after the Prime Minister had sent a petition to the Chinese General Chang, the latter became so furious that he requested the Dalai Lama to immediately remove Lukhangwa from Office since he "was obstructing their welfare program".

Chang told the Dalai Lama that the Tibetans had signed an agreement which mentioned that *"Chinese forces should be stationed in Tibet "* and he added that the Tibetan Government was *"therefore obliged to provide them [the Chinese] with accommodation and supplies"*. He added that the Chinese *"...had only come to help Tibet ... to protect her against imperialist domination and that they would go back to China.... when you can stand on your feet, we will not stay here even if you ask us to."*ⁱⁱⁱ

The Dalai Lama had no alternative but to dismiss Lukhangwa:

... to oppose and anger the Chinese authorities could only lead us further along the vicious circle of repression and popular resentment...Our only hope was to persuade the Chinese peaceably to fulfil the promises they had made in their agreement. Non-violence was the only course which might win us back a degree of freedom in the end, perhaps after years of patience. That meant co-operation whenever it was possible, and passive resistance whenever it was not.^{iv}

It was the first breach of the Agreement, which stipulated that the Chinese would maintain the existing political system and the status and powers of the Dalai Lama. Removing the Prime Minister as an intermediary between the Dalai Lama and the Cabinet resulted in the young Dalai Lama having subsequently to deal directly with the Cabinet and the Chinese.

The last resistance had fallen, but could it have been otherwise? Non-violence and passive resistance had no meaning for the Chinese invaders. During the course of her history, China has shown more respect for power and force (the barrel of the gun) than for anything else. While China had to request food from India, it has to be mentioned here that India was having very serious problems of food grain supply at that time and Nehru's government had no alternative but to import food grain. China readily agreed when he asked it to export rice to India, this help was not without a price.

On April 5, 1952 Panikkar, the Indian Ambassador to China, called on Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Prime Minister, who clearly told him that in his view *"for many years Tibet would have to depend on India for several daily necessities and desired facilities for transportation of food supplies to Tibet via Calcutta"*.

It was ironic that the Indian side immediately succumbed to the argument, they should have known (in fact most probably they did know) that Tibet had always been self-sustainable in food and the extra demand was coming only from the Chinese troops. But at that time it was not too hard to fool the Indian Ambassador.^v

Zhou Enlai^{vi} went a step further: he wanted to know "*India's attitude to the construction of a road connecting India with Lhasa*". The clever Chinese Prime Minister added that China had "*agreed to continued supply of foodgrains to India for the whole year in exchange for certain commodities*".

At that point in time, a controversy erupted when Roche Victoria, the Food Minister of Madras declared that at a meeting of the Food Ministers on 22 March, 1952, it was said that China had refused to send any more food grains to India.

One month later, Roche Victoria was no longer a minister in the Madras cabinet, and K.M. Munshi, the Union Food Minister, clarified that the government had only said that unlike the previous year, when the Chinese had helped India by sending food grains, this year they might not be able to send any rice due to their own difficult food position.

A few days later, Nehru replied in detail to Panikkar's telegrams.

Rice supplies. Government of India are grateful to the Chinese Government for offer of 100,000 tons of rice. Food Ministry is communicating with you on this subject directly. This question should be kept entirely separate from provision of transit facilities to Tibet through India.^{vii}

The Indian Prime Minister was more clear-minded than his ambassador, he immediately saw the difficulties, but did he realize that the grain needed by China was for the troops who were building strategic roads to the Indian border?

Nevertheless, Nehru knew that logistically it was not an easy proposition to transport food grains or any other merchandise from India through the Sikkim road to Lhasa and then eventually to China. Nehru told his ambassador:

We should distinguish between continuance of old border trade between India and Tibet and new proposals of trade in bulk between China and

Tibet passing through India. Latter raises important problems of transit which have to be considered by several Ministries. Burden on our transport system is already heavy and we have to consider carefully any additional burden. It must be remembered also that direct route from Calcutta to Darjeeling now passes through Pakistan territory [now Bangladesh], and this leads to political complications and is causing us continuous trouble. Any other route is a roundabout one. Indeed it has only recently become feasible by opening of narrow Assam railway link which is not enough even for our present requirements.

In the same telegram, the political implications were pointed out. In fact, when the deal was finally concluded, a senior Chinese officer had to be posted in Gangtok to oversee the trans-shipment through the Chumbi valley. In view of the strategic importance of the place (Kalimpong had been for centuries the observation post for the Himalayan region), it was certainly an added advantage for Chinese intelligence. With one stone, Beijing killed many birds: they were feeding their troops who were building roads leading to India; they were releasing the pressure on the Tibetan population which was becoming restive due to the shortage of commodities; and they were also posting an intelligence officer to keep an eye on the gate to Tibet.

Nehru quite rightly wrote:

The other proposal of China trade passing through India to Tibet raises, as we have pointed out above, very difficult problems of transport. Apart from this it has certain political implications. It would probably involve Chinese agencies operating transit and other arrangements at several points inside India. It means modifying existing patterns of trade and grant of transit facilities on a large and continuous scale. We are prepared to examine this matter but this would be a concession which we should retain as a bargaining counter for negotiations for an overall settlement between China and us. It is not advantageous to us to accept such proposals piecemeal and yet have no general settlement.

Here again Nehru as in the case of the downgrading of the Lhasa Mission to a Consulate General and other matters, Nehru spoke about a bargaining counter,

but eventually everything would be given away for the sake of 'brotherhood' at the time of the negotiations for the Panchsheel Agreement in 1953-54.

We have to point out that Nehru was not that innocent and had clearly understood the destination of the rice bags. Here is the conclusion of his letter:

Presumably these food supplies are meant for Chinese army in Tibet which, from all accounts, is in great need of them. We are not particularly anxious to facilitate movement and retention of large numbers of Chinese troops in Tibet.

Panikkar informed Nehru that it had been made clear to the Chinese that India could guarantee transit of only a limited quantity of food grains, though he promised that the Indian government would try its best to transport five hundred tons per month. This was of course subject to weather conditions and availability of mules from Tibet. The transport would be done at the Chinese government's risk.

Panikkar suggested that India might offer to transport 3,500 tons of rice by the end of 1952.

On May 24, Nehru replied:

We have agreed to grant transit facilities for food grains up to end of 1952 at the rate of 500 tons a month. Subject to weather and availability of mules we are willing to work for transport of target figure of 3,500 tones. We see little prospect, however, of achieving this, since first shipment is not likely to reach India before some time next month and bad weather may interrupt transit for a month on land journey. Two thousand five hundred tons is, therefore, the probable attainable target and it might be worthwhile explaining this to the Chinese so as to avoid future misunderstanding.

However Nehru was not too happy with the deal. He saw that India had some cards in its hand and though Tibet could not be saved, India should use the Tibetan card to settle the newly arisen border problem with China. But these cards were also eventually surrendered a few months into the emerging Bhai-Bhai policy. No benefit was obtained from showing favour to Beijing.

Early in 1952, however, Nehru could still see the advantages of India's position and was keen to preserve them:

We have told you that any permanent or semi-permanent arrangements can be discussed only as a part of general settlement of our interests in Tibet. (These interests, as you know, are not confined to trade relations but involve political interests such as affirmation of the Frontier.) It would be preferable not to mention this in your proposed note. We had really intended this for your information only.

But the Chinese were becoming greedier, they now wanted the rice to be delivered at Phari instead of Yatung.

John Lall, a former Dewan of Sikkim, was posted in Gangtok when the supply of rice was in transit; he could witness the long caravan of mules leaving in the direction of Nathu-la. In his book on Aksai Chin, he recalled:

But suddenly all was sweetness and light. The reason became apparent when a request was made for shipment of Chinese rice through India and Sikkim to their troops in Tibet. This could, and indeed should, have been made the occasion for a settlement of the major problems with China as a prelude to the altogether unprecedented help requested from the Government of India. It simply did not occur to anyone in Delhi, and which caution as I advised was brushed aside. Released from anxiety on accounts of supplies, the Chinese and local Tibetan labour were able to press ahead with the vitally important task of creating a network of communications to defend frontiers of China with India.

Soon after the matter became public. Suddenly Nehru had to explain how it was that India could supply rice to the Chinese occupying Tibet. During a press conference in New Delhi, he was asked: *"Is it a fact that you allowed rice to be sent to Tibet?"*

Nehru explained his policy.

Not in big quantities. We did allow a small quantity of rice, relatively small quantity, as an exceptional case. You know, it is a very difficult route; it is not easy to go to Tibet from Calcutta-mule tracks, difficult mountain terrain and the rest of it. It is not an easy matter, but because of their great need, we have allowed some quantity of rice to go through. And, as you know, China sent us one lakh tons of rice.^{viii} That is not a very great figure, but it merely was a generous gesture of the Chinese Government

especially as this year has been a difficult year for them from the point of view of food. It was not easy for them to spare even this for us, nevertheless they did it.

When asked if the arrangement was on an *ad hoc* basis, he answered “*completely*”.

But it was not to be a one-time affair: negotiations continued for the supply of more rice during the following years. On 12 April 1953, during a meeting with Raghavan, the new Indian Ambassador to China, Zhou Enlai said that he was “*anxious for friendly relations with India and had offered help in transport of various articles to Tibet via India*”.

On April 19, Nehru cabled his Ambassador:

As we have told you, we are prepared to allow the 1,000 tons of Chinese rice which are already in India to be sent to Tibet, subject to transport arrangements. But, it must not be taken for granted that this is a normal procedure. This transport business gives us a lot of trouble.

I might inform you that our rice position is much better now and we are not in terribly urgent need of it. But if we can get rice from China on reasonable terms, we will be prepared to take it for future use.

When the Panchsheel Agreement was signed in April 1954, it was considered by many as Nehru’s final capitulation to communist China.

In surrendering without any compensation or even guarantee the century-old buffer that was Tibet, the doors of North India were open wide to the communist Chinese. However Nehru still considered it the best thing he had ever done.

The ‘friendship’ or the ‘foolishness’ reached a new height when on October 20, 1954 it was announced that although China had enough rice, India had decided to supply again rice to the PLA stationed in Tibet. It was a first in military annals that the government of a country supplied food to enemy troops! But of course, at that time nobody thought of China as an enemy.

As quoted in an article in *The Hindu*:

Mr. Kung Yuan, leader of the Chinese trade delegation announced the conclusion of another agreement for the purchase of 1,500 tons of Indian

rice by China for supply to Tibet and that the negotiations were in progress in regard to the purchase of one other 1,000 tons.

...Rice which China would buy was intended exclusively for Tibet and only difficulties of transport has necessitated this purchase by China.^{ix}

India was supplying rice to the Chinese troops, engaged in building a road on Indian territory!^x Not just ordinary roads, it has now been proved that the Aksai Chin road, which cuts through Indian territory in Ladakh, was already under construction.^{xi} The road was be completed and inaugurated by Zhou Enlai in 1957.

The first recorded intrusions on Indian territory occurred just a few months after signing the Panchsheel Agreement. The Chinese accused Indian border patrols of having crossed Niti-la in western UP, while in fact it was the Chinese officers who had tried to assert possession of this part of the Indian territory called Hoti, southeast of the Nita-la border pass. The correspondence between the Government of India and China which began in July/August 1954 marks the beginning of hundreds of letters, notes and memoranda exchanged on the border issue during the following eight years.

But at that time, euphoria over the newly- found 'brotherhood' was too great for anyone to realize the strategic and other implications for India's security. In October 1954, the Indian Prime Minister went to Peking to celebrate the 'friendship'. One newspaper wrote: *"The meeting of Nehru and Mao may change history."* During the banquet Nehru *"spoke in Hindustani was applauded at the end of each sentence,"* though nobody understood Hindustani!

ⁱ In a place called Rima, near Walong in eastern Arunachal Pradesh.

ⁱⁱ Quoted from Goldstein, Melville, *The Fall of the Lamaist State* (University of California Press: 1989), p. 644.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Dalai Lama, *My Land and my People*, (New York: Potala Corporation, 1977), p. 92.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 97.

^v John Lall quoted Escort Reid, the Canadian High Commissioner to say: "He had no illusion about the policies of the Chinese government and he has not been misled by it. He considered, however, that the future, at least in his lifetime, lay with the communists and he therefore did his best to get in well with them by misleading Nehru". See Lall John, *Aksai Chin and the Sino-Indian Conflict* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1988), p. 239.

^{vi} Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, (Vol. 18, Series II, New Delhi, 12 April 1952), p. 471.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 471.

^{viii} A contract for the purchase of 100,000 metric tons of rice on cash basis was signed in Peking on 26 May 1952. The rice was to be shipped in the course of the next three months.

^{ix} *The Hindu*, Madras, 21 October 1950.

^x Lall, op. cit., pp. 235-36.

^{xi} See Claude Arpi, *The Fate of Tibet*, (Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1999).