



## **Idealism bordering on blunder**

*Missed opportunities*

*(Unabridged version)*

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*The Fate of Tibet: When big insects eat little insects* by Claude Arpi, with a Foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. (1999). Har-Anand, 364-A Chirag Delhi, New Delhi — 110 017; 432 pages. Price Rs. 595 (HB).

### **National interest vs international recognition**

Claude Arpi is a French scholar with a deep and abiding interest in spirituality, especially Tibetan Buddhism. In 1971, on a visit to Manali in the Himalayas, he met his first Tibetans, an event that was to change his life. As he tells us, "They had lost everything: their country, their wealth, very often many members of their family and still they could stand on the road and smile. ...How could someone educated in a Cartesian country with a modern utilitarian education understand this bizarre phenomenon?" This was the beginning of a nearly thirty-year quest to understand the Tibetans and their tragedy. He shares the result of that experience — along with its lessons — in the magnificent book reviewed here. The author understands that Tibet is unique among the countries of the world in having a history shaped more by spirituality than political movements. Recognizing this, the author begins with a history of Tibet always keeping its spirituality in focus. In a real sense, Tibet entered the 'modern' period with the Younghusband expedition of 1914, which formalized the relationship between India and

Tibet. But what followed, especially after India's independence in 1947, was a tragedy of epic proportions. As Mr. Arpi shows, what the Nehru Government did was not only betray Tibet, but also severely undermine India's own security interests in pursuit of personal glory — even to the extent of placing Chinese interests ahead of Indian interests. This is the untold story of recent history that comes to light upon studying *The Fate of Tibet*. To follow this, however, we must visit the world after Indian independence in 1947, followed by the Communist takeover of China in 1949. In the year 1950, two momentous events shook Asia and the world. One was the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and the other, Chinese intervention in the Korean War. The first was near, on India's borders, the other, far away in the Korean Peninsula where India had little at stake. By all canons of logic, India should have devoted utmost attention to the immediate situation in Tibet, and let interested parties like China and the U.S. sort it out in Korea. But Jawaharlal Nehru, India's Prime Minister, did exactly the opposite. He treated the Tibetan crisis in a perfunctory fashion, while getting heavily involved in Korea. India today is paying for this misplacement of priorities by being the only country of its size in the world without an official boundary with its giant neighbor. Tibet itself disappeared from the map. It was a tragedy both in the Greek and the Shakespearean sense. On the surface the Kashmir Problem and the border problem with China appear different, but on closer examination, they are found to have similar roots. In Kashmir, Nehru ignored the advice of his field commanders, General K.S. Thimayya and General L.P. Sen, and referred the case to the United Nations on Mountbatten's advice. In the case of Tibet also, Nehru chose to be guided by Krishna Menon and K.M. Panikkar — both known communist sympathizers — while disregarding the advice of Sardar Vallabhai Patel. India gave up treaty rights and interests that she had inherited from the British, allowing China a free hand in Tibet.

Simultaneously, he became preoccupied with Korea in an effort to project himself as a mediator between Socialism and the West. In both cases, Nehru sacrificed national interest at home in pursuit of international glory abroad. This is the picture that emerges from some fresh evidence that Mr. Arpi brings to light, especially from Tibetan sources and British archives.

### **Betrayal of Tibet**

Part of the difficulty in unraveling the historical scene is lack of access to records relating to the period. Nehru's heirs continue to exercise dictatorial control over these vital documents, including those in the National Archives! Strangely, many of the same records are available at the India Office in London. And thereby hangs a tale. When India became independent, H.E. Richardson, British representative in Lhasa, was asked by the Nehru Government to continue as Indian representative. And Richardson sent copies of his correspondence with his new bosses in Delhi to his former superiors in London. This was an act of questionable loyalty, but fortunate for historians. Mr. Arpi has made extensive use of them in addition to hard to obtain Tibetan records. This makes his book indispensable for any serious study of the events leading to the disaster of 1962. To return to Tibet, at the time of the Chinese invasion in 1950, Indo-Tibetan relationships had been governed by the Simla Agreement of 1914. According to this agreement, 'Outer Tibet', corresponding to present day Tibet, was to be entirely autonomous. China would not interfere in this region, and would not also convert it into a Chinese province. (Forty years later, China violated both.) Another important decision was the demarcation of the famous McMahon Line as the boundary between India and Tibet. It is of crucial importance to note that the Chinese representative was not invited for the negotiations leading to it; nor did China ask anything about the final demarcation. The decision was reached

entirely between the Tibetan representative Lonchen Shatra and Sir Henry McMahon. This means that all the parties recognized that Tibet had full authority to negotiate its boundary with India. Other sources indicate that as late as 1954, if not later, China was willing to settle for this demarcation had Nehru shown more interest in the border problem than in his Pancha Sheela. Disputes between China and Tibet were confined to the eastern and northern regions of Tibet that made up what was known as 'Inner Tibet'. India at the time maintained missions in Lhasa and Gyantse. Due to close relations between India and Tibet going back centuries and also unsettled conditions in China, Tibet's transactions with the outside world were conducted mainly through India. Well into 1950, the Indian Government regarded Tibet as a free country. China also had a mission in Lhasa, but on July 8, 1949, following the defeat of Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist Government in the civil war, the Tibetan Government asked the Chinese to leave. Tibetan records show that they had planned the expulsion of the Chinese for more than a year. These Chinese officials, being representatives of the Nationalist Government, wanted to come through India. The Indian Government (of Nehru) expressed its delicate position, but did not question the authority of the Tibetans to expel them. The Communist Chinese also, now in control of the mainland, did not demand that they be handed over. Nehru wrote to Lhasa: "The Tibetan Government are the best judges of their own interests but to us it would seem unwise on their part to take any steps which, in effect mean the forced discontinuance of the Chinese mission in Lhasa." At the same time, the Indian Government offered help to make it as smooth as possible. This means, as Mr. Arpi observes, the Government of India, "in view of friendly relations with the Tibetan Government" was ready to help Lhasa with its security concerns. This clearly shows that Nehru and his Government regarded the 'Tibetan Government' as an independent entity in no way

subordinate to China. The Chinese announced their invasion of Tibet on 25 October 1950. According to them, it was to 'free Tibet from imperialist forces', and consolidate its border with India. Nehru announced that he and the Indian Government were "extremely perplexed and disappointed with the Chinese Government's action... ." Nehru also complained that he had been "led to believe by the Chinese Foreign Office that the Chinese would settle the future of Tibet in a peaceful manner by direct negotiation with the representatives of Tibet..." Nehru was being less than candid. In September 1949, more than a year before the Chinese invasion, Nehru himself had written: "Chinese communists are likely to invade Tibet." The point to note is that Nehru, by sending mixed signals and showing more interest in Korea than in Tibet, had encouraged the Chinese to invade Tibet. The Chinese in fact made no secret of their desire to invade Tibet. The day after the Chinese invasion, the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* aptly summed up the situation as follows: "The Indian Government had 'invited' China to open military operation on Tibet by her attitude. ... From the very beginning of the year and at frequent intervals the liberation of Tibet had been proclaimed over the radio as a task of the Chinese Communist Government... The Indian Government made it equally clear that it had no desire to intervene militarily. This was a clear invitation to the Communists to proceed and the only reason for surprise is that they left it so late in the year."

### **Nehru sponsors China**

Upon examining the records of the period one gets the uneasy sense that Nehru didn't really mind Tibet falling to the Communists — or 'socialists' — as Nehru and Menon preferred to call them. There was also an element of arrogance on Nehru's part that a 'backward' country like Tibet would benefit from a small dose of socialism from a 'progressive' country like

China. When Mr. Arpi put the question to the Dalai Lama, he laughed and said: "Not a small dose, but a very large dose!" Nehru chose to believe that China in control of Tibet posed no threat to India's security. In this he seems to have been guided by a belief that a 'socialist' country like China can never be aggressive — an idea that he shared with Krishna Menon. In addition, while the Chinese were moving troops into Tibet, there was little concern in Indian official circles. Panikkar, the Indian Ambassador in Beijing, went so far as to pretend that there was 'lack of confirmation' of the presence of Chinese troops in Tibet and that to protest the Chinese invasion of Tibet would be an "interference to India's efforts on behalf of China in the UN". So Panikkar was more interested in protecting Chinese interests in the UN than India's own interests on the Tibetan border! Amazingly Nehru concurred with his Ambassador. He wrote, "our primary consideration is maintenance of world peace... Recent developments in Korea have not strengthened China's position, which will be further weakened by any aggressive action [by India] in Tibet." So Nehru was ready to sacrifice India's security interests in Tibet so as not to weaken China's case in the UN! It is also unclear how his "primary consideration" of maintaining world peace would be served by the Chinese invasion of Tibet. It is nothing short of tragic that the two greatest influences on Nehru at this crucial juncture in history were Krishna Menon and K.M. Panikkar, both communists. Panikkar, while nominally serving as Indian ambassador in China, became practically a spokesman for Chinese interests in Tibet. Sardar Patel remarked that Panikkar "has been at great pains to find an explanation or justification for Chinese policy and actions." This was to lead eventually to India repudiating its right to have a diplomatic mission in Lhasa on the ground that it was an 'imperialist legacy'. Apparently it did not strike Nehru that his own position as Prime Minister was also an imperialist legacy, especially since he had been Prime Minister in the interim

Government in 1946. In all this there was a belief amounting to dogma that only European powers could be imperialist. This flies in the face of recent history — of Japan in the Second World War and China after it. This dogma was one of the factors that contributed to Nehru's discredited 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai'. It is worth noting that Mao had no reciprocal affection for India and never spoke of 'Chini-Hindi Bhai Bhai' — or its Chinese equivalent. Far from it, he had only contempt for India and its leaders. Mao respected only the strong who would oppose him, and not the weak who bent over backwards to please him. Nehru, however, continued to believe that his idealism would make the Chinese respond in kind.

### **Sardar Patel's warning**

Nehru's sentiment was not shared by others. Sardar Patel for one observed: "Even though we regard ourselves as friends of China, the Chinese do not regard us as friends." He wrote a celebrated letter in which he expressed deep concern over developments in Tibet, raising several important points. In particular, he noted that a free and friendly Tibet was vital for India's security, and everything including military measures should be considered to ensure it. He made two telling points: (1) A reconsideration of retrenchment plans for the army (following World War II) in light of the new threats posed by China's aggressive designs in Tibet. (2) A long-term assessment of defense needs to assure adequate supplies of arms, ammunition, armor and communication equipment. On November 9, 1950, two days after he wrote the letter to Nehru, he announced in Delhi: "In Kali Yuga, we shall return *ahimsa* for *ahimsa*. If anybody resorts to force against us, we shall meet it with force." But Nehru ignored Patel's letter. (What follows next is an analysis based partly on sources outside Mr. Arpi's book.) Patel, though not flamboyant like Nehru, clearly understood the ground rules of international affairs including timely and effective use of

force. He recognized that in 1950, China was in a vulnerable position, fully committed in Korea and by no means secure in its hold over the mainland. For months General MacArthur had been urging President Truman to 'unleash Chiang Kai Shek' lying in wait in Formosa (Taiwan) with full American support. China had not yet acquired the atom bomb, which was more than ten years in the future. India had little to lose and everything to gain in a determined show of force when China was struggling to consolidate its hold. In addition, India had international support, with world opinion strongly against Chinese aggression in Tibet. The world in fact was looking to India to take the lead. The highly influential publication, *The Economist* of London, echoed the Western viewpoint when it wrote: "Having maintained complete independence of China since 1912, Tibet has a strong claim to be regarded as an independent state. *But it is for India to take a lead in this matter.* If India decides to support independence of Tibet as a buffer state between itself and China, Britain and U.S.A. will do well to extend formal diplomatic recognition to it." But this was not to be. Nehru ignored Patel's letter as well as international opinion and gave up this golden opportunity to turn Tibet into a friendly buffer state. With such a principled stand, India would also have acquired the status of a great power while Pakistan would have disappeared from the radar screen of world attention. Much has been made of Nehru's blunder in Kashmir, but it pales in comparison with his folly in Tibet. As a result of this monumental failure of vision — and nerve — India soon came to be treated as a third rate power, acquiring 'parity' with Pakistan. Two months later Patel was also dead. And for the next nearly half century, India's fate was left to the whims and caprices of small men and women of no vision. It was an illustration of Edmund Burke's dictum: "Little minds and a great empire go ill together." I would like to restate that some of the analysis above is my own, based on Mr. Arpi's book and a few other sources. It is given here

because I feel that Mr. Arpi understates the magnitude of the strategic blunder committed by Nehru in his betrayal of Tibet. (Perhaps it lies outside the scope of his interest.) The main point that needs to be emphasized is that with a principled stand in Tibet along the lines indicated by Patel, India had everything to gain and nothing to lose. What Nehru followed was a policy of fantasy rooted in moral weakness.

### **India recognizes China**

A question that naturally arises is whether India was in a position to influence China in 1950 to stop or at least slow down its advance. There can be no definitive answer, but I have indicated earlier that China in 1950 was not in as strong a position militarily, domestically or internationally, as it was to be a decade later. In addition there was always the danger that the United States may 'unleash Chiang Kai Shek' — to use General MacArthur's phrase — and threaten Mao's position on the mainland. Basically India had little to lose in taking a firm stand against Chinese intervention in Tibet, citing historic treaties between India and Tibet. But Nehru did the opposite. He refused to protest against the Chinese advance in Tibet because that would prove an 'embarrassment' for the Chinese at a difficult time. Further, at a time when the legitimacy of Communist takeover of China was being questioned by most countries, Nehru, influenced by Panikkar, not only recognized Communist China, but went out of his way to try to make it a permanent member of the UN Security Council in place of Nationalist China. In the process, he gave up India's diplomatic rights in Lhasa. The Indian mission in Lhasa now became a Consulate General, subordinate to Ambassador Panikkar in Beijing. India gained nothing from this conduct except hostility from the West. Nehru ignored the most fundamental principle of all foreign policy — there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests. Even more than India's later

friendship with the Soviet Union, it was the squalid betrayal of Tibet and the sponsorship of Mao's China that soured India's relationship with America. Acharya Kripalani declared in the Parliament: "Soon, this nation [China] that was struggling for its own freedom, strangulated the freedom of a neighboring nation [Tibet], in whose freedom we are intimately connected." And the great historian

K.D. Sethna, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo wrote: "In recognizing Red China the Indian Government has committed a mistake whose gravity beggars description. We have made a New Year's gesture, which would rank as one of the stupidest in our history if its stupidity were not surpassed by its perniciousness." It is worth noting that India got nothing in return from China or anyone else for the generosity. At the very least, India should have demanded settling the boundary between the two countries in return for recognizing China at a time when it was being treated as an international pariah. Nothing like that happened. National interest apparently didn't enter into Nehru's calculations.

**Pancha Sheela but no boundary** This brings us to another important contribution of Mr. Arpi's book — the deception practiced by Nehru on the Indians themselves. On the heels of this twin blunder — abandonment of Tibet and sponsorship of China, with nothing to show in return — Nehru began a third march of folly and deception in which national interest became subordinate to his pursuit of international glory. This was called Pancha Sheela. There was ample historical and contemporary evidence to show that China respected only strength and not pacific pronouncements based on utopian fantasy. If China were such an admirer of pacifism, it would not have brutally erased the peaceful state of Tibet. But Nehru wanted to see none of this. As Mr. Arpi observes, "nothing would stop Nehru from going ahead with his policy of friendship with China. Over the years, the myth of the Indo-Chinese friendship would grow larger and

larger, becoming a 'brotherhood', until that day in October 1962 when Lin Biao and his PLA [People's Liberation Army] on the Thagla Ridge in the West Kameng Division in NEFA [Arunachal Pradesh]." Within days of the Chinese attack, the whole of the eastern front crumbled, though the Indian Army, with better leadership put up a creditable fight on the western front in Ladakh against overwhelming odds. Nehru's (and Menon's) favorite general B.M. Kaul, commander of IV Corps in NEFA, abandoned the troops to their fate — just as Nehru earlier had abandoned Tibet — to get himself admitted to the Military Hospital in Delhi. Still there was no cause for panic. Had there been prior military planning to coordinate the Air Force with the Army, the Chinese would have been hard pressed, possibly even defeated. (The Chinese Air Force was pinned down on the Soviet frontier, and lacked the logistic wherewithal to fly sorties across the Himalayas.) The point however is that Nehru and Menon had paid no attention to military needs or strategy. They were much too busy posturing and pontificating to the world about Pancha Sheela, holding it up as received wisdom. In the process, they succeeded only in deceiving the Indian people, while giving China invaluable time to build up their military and consolidate their hold over Tibet, including building supply lines to the Indian border. The Pancha Sheela, which was the principal 'policy' of Nehru towards China from the betrayal of Tibet to the expulsion of Dalai Lama in 1959, is generally regarded as exploitation of Nehru's good faith, which was exploited by the Chinese who 'stabbed him in the back'. This is not quite correct, for Nehru was himself guilty of both policy blunders and deception: *Nehru (and Menon) knew about the Chinese incursions in Ladakh and Aksai Chin but kept it secret for years to keep the illusion of Pancha Sheela alive.* What follows next is a summary of some details that are not discussed by the author of *The Fate of Tibet*, but relate to it in a fundamental way. To understand this, it is necessary to appreciate the situation at the time. In

the years following the Korean War, *what China wanted most was a stable border with India*. As previously noted, China was not then as strong as it was to become a decade later, and the Indian Army had an outstanding reputation following its brilliant record in the Second World War, Kashmir and Korea. With this in view, the Chinese Premier Zhou-en-Lai visited India several times to fix the boundary between the two countries. In short, the Chinese proposal amounted to the following: they were prepared to accept the McMahon Line as the boundary in the east — with possibly some minor adjustments and a new name — and then negotiate the unmarked boundary in the west between Ladakh and Tibet. In effect, what Zhou-en-Lai proposed was a phased settlement, beginning with the eastern boundary. But Nehru showed little interest in a practical solution; he wanted the whole thing settled at once in accordance with his Pancha Sheela! To him, Pancha Sheela was the thing, the boundary settlement secondary. The highly practical Zhou-en-Lai found this impossible. And on each visit, the Chinese Premier in search of a boundary settlement, unflinching got an earful of sermons on Pancha Sheela from Nehru. He interpreted this as intransigence on Nehru's part. (It is worth keeping in mind that many Asian leaders at the time, including Mao, saw the highly westernized Nehru as an Anglo-American stooge and Indian independence — obtained peacefully — as a sham.) Again it is important to keep in focus the purpose of Zhou-en-Lai's visits to India: stable borders — not lessons in Pancha Sheela. China in fact went on to settle its boundary with Myanmar (Burma) roughly along the McMahon Line. Contrary to what the Indian public was told, the border between Tibet and Ladakh (in the Princely State of Kashmir) was never clearly demarcated. As late as 1960, the Indian Government sent survey teams to Ladakh to mark the boundary and prepare maps. But Nehru kept on misleading the people that there was a clearly defined boundary, which the Chinese were refusing to accept. (All

this again from sources mainly outside Mr. Arpi's book.) This being the state of affairs — with no recognized border — what the situation demanded was a creative approach based on mutual give and take. There were several practical issues on which negotiations could have been conducted. China needed Aksai Chin because they had plans to construct a strategically important access road from Tibet to Xinjiang province (Sinkiang) in the west. So Aksai Chin was of far greater strategic significance to China than to India. (It may in fact be argued that it is a strategic liability for India — being expensive to maintain and hard to supply, even more so than the Saichen Glacier.) Had Nehru recognized this he could have proposed a solution like asking for Mount Kailash and Manasarovar in exchange for Aksai Chin. Alternatively, the Chinese could have free passage through Aksai Chin in exchange for similar passage for Indians to Kailash and Manasarovar. Strategically and culturally, these are of much greater significance to India than Aksai Chin. In fact, in 1849, Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir had sent an expeditionary force under Zorawar Singh to acquire them. It was defeated by the weather. The issue is not whether such an agreement was possible, but no negotiations were even proposed. Nehru simply wasn't interested in the boundary issue. Instead, Nehru kept misleading the Indian public by claiming that there was a clearly demarcated border that was beyond dispute and China was creating the whole problem. This was pure demagoguery that only wasted valuable time and diverted attention from real issues. The early fifties were the right time to settle the border for China was not then militarily as strong as it became a decade later. The upshot of all this was that China ignored India — and Nehru's Pancha Sheela — and went ahead with its plan to build the road through Aksai Chin. India again got nothing in return.

### **Indian public deceived**

This brings us back to Mr. Arpi's book. Pancha Sheela was not the only deception, as Mr. Arpi convincingly shows. What the Indian public does not know is that Nehru and Menon had been fully informed about the Chinese encroachment in Aksai Chin — years before it became public. Most Indians learnt of the Chinese encroachment in 1959, when the Dalai Lama was forced to come to India. General Thimayya had brought the Chinese activities in Aksai Chin to the notice of Nehru and Menon several years before that. Mr. Arpi produces evidence showing that in 1955, an English mountaineer by name Sydney Wignall was deputed by Thimayya to verify reports that the Chinese were building a road through Aksai Chin. He was captured by the Chinese but released and made his way back to India after incredible difficulties, surviving several snowstorms. Now Thimayya had proof of Chinese incursion. When the Army presented this to the Government, Menon blew up. In Nehru's presence, he told the senior officer making the presentation that he was "lapping up CIA agent provocateur propaganda." This is not the whole story. I can confirm that Wignall was not Thimayya's only source. Shortly after the Chinese attack in 1962, General Thimayya, in a talk in Bangalore, mentioned that he had deputed a young officer of the Madras Sappers (MEG) to Aksai Chin to investigate reports of Chinese intrusion. The officer was captured by the Chinese who were there in strength, but released some weeks later, after he signed a few papers. I had the opportunity to see Thimayya the next day and discuss it in more detail. On neither occasion did Thimayya say anything about Wignall's report but confirmed that he had informed the Government about the Chinese occupation of Aksai Chin several years before it was made public. (My father was then a serving officer who had served under Thimayya in Korea and knew him well.)

## **Conclusion**

So the following facts relating to the Indo-Chinese border negotiations are inescapable. First, Nehru ignored repeated efforts by the Chinese to settle the border in phases beginning with the eastern boundary. Years that should have been devoted to demarcating the boundary between the two giants — when India was in a relatively strong negotiating position — were squandered on the meaningless exercise of Pancha Sheela, which had no purpose beyond glorifying Nehru on the world stage. During these ten years, China became a great military power, while India's own armed forces deteriorated due to neglect and mismanagement by Nehru's favorite Krishna Menon. As observed earlier, Nehru compounded this folly with deception, by keeping the Indian public in the dark about Chinese activities in Ladakh and Aksai Chin, even though he and Menon had been fully informed by the Army. This again was because of his desire to keep alive the illusion of friendship that he wanted to project as the fruit of his brainchild Pancha Sheela. So, as in Kashmir and in Tibet later, every interest was sacrificed to project Nehru as a pacific sage. India is still paying the price; for Tibet it has been a catastrophe. In the present article, I have occasionally gone beyond the scope of Mr. Arpi's book because of the great importance of the issues raised by him and the magnitude of his contribution. I feel that it is extremely important for the public to know the true picture — a picture that has been obfuscated to protect the reputation of Nehru and his followers, with his heirs even going to the extent of suppressing documents in the National Archives. In the process all the blame has been put on the Chinese, in an attempt to turn Nehru into a guileless soul. While there is enough blame to go around, and no one including the Tibetans comes out unscathed, Nehru was at least as guilty as anyone — guilty of both deception and shortsightedness. But unlike his Chinese counterpart, he sacrificed national interest for the sake of personal glory. The result: India today is the only country of its size in the world

without a recognized boundary with its giant neighbor. In summary, *The Fate of Tibet* by Claude Arpi is a monumental contribution to the study of this important but poorly understood phase of Indian history and foreign policy. It sheds new light and raises important questions for the Indian political-military establishment — and the public. Unfortunately, the editorial work is not on the same level as the author's diligence and scholarship. Panikkar's name is often misspelt, and surely, a work as important and complex as *The Fate of Tibet* deserves an index. It is hoped that these will be corrected in a future edition. In the meantime, the author has produced a work of first importance that must be studied by every serious student of this history and every policymaker in India.