

Book review 1999

*The Fate of Tibet: When Big Insects Eat Small Insects (Claude Arpi,
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By Thubten Samphel

Not many Tibetans would have heard about K.M. Pannikar, independent India's ambassador to Nationalist and later to Communist China when India switched diplomatic recognition to the new republic on the mainland. If they haven't they should because he, more than any other Indian, played a decisive role in the weak, ambivalent stand Nehru took towards China on the issue of Tibet.

In 1948 when K.M. Pannikar was still India's ambassador to Nationalist China, he wrote a confidential memo to his government. The diplomat said, "Information available here points to the conclusion that if the Kuomintang Government falls Tibet will make a public declaration of her independence and request recognition from India, Britain and the United States. The British position has always been in favour of recognising the independence of Tibet and in the changed circumstances America may not also hesitate. If Outer Tibet's claim of independence is recognised by Britain, America and India, there may be some hope of keeping the new Chinese Communist State away from the Indian border."

From a hard-headed analyst of India's vital interests as reflected in his 1948 memo, how did Pannikar later become such an ardent apologist for Chinese policies and intentions towards Tibet? In short, how did Indian foreign policy, from its first steps in recognising de

facto Tibetan independence, slide to the one officially stated in the Panchsheel agreement of 1954?

According to some, Pannikar went to the extent of deliberately substituting "sovereignty" for "suzerainty" where in a 26 August 1950 cable he defined India's policy towards Tibet as "autonomy within the framework of Chinese sovereignty". It was only on 1 November 1950 India formally informed China that the term "sovereignty" was a mistake and the correct term should have been "suzerainty."

Such an "oversight" and the other details of Pannikar's gradual "hijacking" and mismanagement of India's China policy, and by corollary its Tibet policy, are revealed in a ground-breaking book *The Fate of Tibet: When Big Insects Eat Small Insects* by Claude Arpi.

The Fate of Tibet contains a detailed analysis of the evolution of Indian policy towards Tibet and the new power in the east. It is enormously enriched by information gathered from countless official Indian documents and interviews with Indian officials who helplessly watched India's slide down the path of appeasement on the Tibetan issue.

The Fate of Tibet is a history of Tibet, from the introduction of Buddhism to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Five-Point Peace Plan which he presented to the members of the US Congress in 1987, which the author thinks is a reasonable solution to the Tibet problem.

However, the best part of the book lies in its analysis of India's response to the increasingly strident claims Communist China made on Tibet, the raucous debate in the Indian parliament on the issue and the eventual stance India took. In all this Pannikar was an important, and in hindsight for both India and Tibet, a tragic factor. "One of the most important factors in the relationship between the Tibetan Government and the Government of India was the

appointment of K.M. Pannikar as an Ambassador to 'two China,' writes Claude Arpi introducing the chapter focusing exclusively on The Pannikar Factor.

Pannikar's pro-China leanings were so obvious that it outraged many Indian leaders and diplomats. "My own feeling is that at a crucial period they managed to instil into our Ambassador a false sense of confidence in their so-called desire to settle the Tibetan problem by peaceful means," wrote Sardar Patel to Nehru in 1950.

The same sentiment was echoed by G.S. Bajpai of the Ministry of External Affairs who, the author states, compared Pannikar's protests over Tibet with Neville Chamberlain's protest to Nazi Germany over Czechoslovakia.

Bajpai was Pannikar's direct boss, but Pannikar had direct access to Nehru who doubled up as India's foreign minister. Bajpai, referring to China's cartographic invasion of India, said, "Our Ambassador has allowed himself to be influenced more by the Chinese point of view, the Chinese claims, the Chinese maps and by regards for Chinese susceptibilities than by his instructions or by India's interests."

The Fate of Tibet tells that there were two different perceptions in the Indian foreign policy establishment. One was advocated by Bajpai, the secretary general of the Indian foreign ministry. He wanted India to take a stronger stand toward China and recommended that India support Tibet's appeal to the UN and continue to supply arms and ammunition to the Tibetan army. Pannikar and B.N. Rau, the Indian representative to the UN, advocated a don't-rock-the-boat policy. Nehru, seeing on the distant horizon the full glimmer of a resurgent Asia, and influenced by Pannikar's own Asia and Western Dominance, opted for the same. In this way, a nation and a people were sacrificed at the altar of one man's vague vision of a future that never came.

Claude Arpi's book is an engrossing, ground-breaking contribution to the tragedy of Tibet and will enrich people's understanding of a story that is still unfolding.

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