

Flying the Flag of Tibet

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Flying the flag of Tibet Following the protests against China's oppression of Tibet, Kashmiri Pandits have begun to view their plight through the Tibetan prism. Unfortunately, Kashmiri Pandits don't have a charismatic leader like the Dalai Lama, though India's ruling family is linked to their community
Claude Arpi

The recent unrest in Tibet and its impact elsewhere has generated a healthy debate in India.

Some sections of the Indian society, like the Kashmiri Pandits, now view their plight through the Tibetan prism. Unfortunately the Pandits do not have a charismatic leader like the Dalai Lama, though India's ruling family belongs to their community and they have remained a divided lot.

Some others say that we should give time to China to progressively evolve into a democratic system.

Probably they are not aware that time is also ticking away against India's interests. Last year alone 3.8 million Chinese 'visited' Tibet using the railway line to Lhasa; many of them decided to stay back on the Roof of the World. By the time we realise that the situation is irreversible, it will be too late. And it is India that will have to suffer. More than 20 years ago, I had asked the Dalai Lama how Tibet would regain its independence (or autonomy). He had answered, "It does not depend on us Tibetans.

Change will come from within China." He was clearly not expecting the United States or India to offer him on a platter the most cherished

dream of his people.

Since then he has repeatedly said that the people of China will bring about changes in their own country which will give a chance to the people of Tibet to fulfil their aspirations.

This is a far more plausible alternative than any other, including a deadlocked dialogue between Dharamsala and Beijing. In this context, three letters addressed to China's President Hu Jintao by veteran Tibetan Communist leader Phuntsok Wangyal, who had led the Chinese troops into Lhasa in September 1951, could trigger a larger debate in China once the Olympic Games are behind us.

Wangyal (known as 'Phunwang' among Tibetans) mentioned several interesting things in his letters to Mr Hu Jintao. He said the Dalai Lama's demise would only radicalise young Tibetan hardliners frustrated with his 'middle way' approach; he reminded the Chinese President about his own objective of establishing a harmonious society; and that if he would strive for the return of hundreds of thousands of exiled Tibetans, he could turn "confrontation into harmony".

The present debate veers around the role and status of the nationalities within the People's Republic of China. A historical incident about the Tibetan flag gives an indication of the direction in which the question could lead.

In the 1980s, I had interviewed Phuntso Tashi Takla, the Dalai Lama's brother-in-law who was in charge of the Tibetan leader's security when the latter visited China in 1954-55. Takla recalled, "At that time (in 1954) because the Chinese occupation of Tibet was not complete, the Chinese extended full courtesy and cooperation to the Dalai Lama. On some occasions Mao Tse-tung himself came to the Dalai Lama's residence (in Beijing). During one of the several discussions that the Dalai Lama and Mao Tse-tung had, Mao (suddenly) said, 'Don't you have a flag of your own, if you have one, you can hoist it here (on the Guest House)'." Takla was surprised to hear Mao Tse-tung speaking thus.

Personally I did not immediately realise the importance of Mao's point, but when I later read Phunwang's biography, I understood better the incalculable implications of the Chairman's statement. It is worth quoting Phunwang: "One day, Mao unexpectedly came to visit the Dalai Lama at his residence... During their conversation, Mao suddenly said, 'I heard that you have a national flag, do you? They do not want you to carry it, isn't that right?'"

Phunwang further recalled, "Since Mao asked this with no warning that the topic was to be discussed, the Dalai Lama just replied, 'We have an Army flag.' I thought that was a shrewd answer because it didn't say whether Tibet had a national flag. Mao perceived that the Dalai Lama

was concerned by his question and immediately told him, 'That is no problem. You may keep your national flag.' Mao definitely said 'national' flag."

Mao added that in the future the Communist Party of China could also let Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia have their own flags. He then asked the Dalai Lama if it would be fine for him to hoist the national flag of the People's Republic of China in addition to the Tibetan flag. Phunwang says that the young Lama nodded his head and said yes. "This was the most important thing that Mao told the Dalai Lama, and I was amazed to hear it," Phunwang later wrote.

His mind immediately started racing. He was not sure if Mao had discussed this with other leaders in the Politburo or if it was his own idea: "As I had always paid great attention to the Soviet Union's nationality model, I was excited because I took Mao's comment that Tibet could use its own flag to mean that China was contemplating adopting the Soviet Union's 'Republic' model, at least for these three large minority nationalities." Phunwang realised that the innocuous remark of the 'Great Helmsman' had far reaching consequences for the future of China and particularly for the Tibetans.

Unfortunately, Phunwang was arrested in April 1958 as he 'needed to cleanse his thinking'. He spent the following 18 years in solitary confinement. This gave him time to ponder over Mao's remarks on the flag and the 'nationalities' issue and their place in the People's Republic of China. His study of Marxism had led him to believe that the relationship between nationalities in a multi-ethnic state should be one of complete equality.

He wrote, "In socialist states, the majority nationality does not (or should not) oppress the minority nationalities. All should be equal, and there should be complete unity and cooperation among nationalities." Most of the problems faced by China today are due to the great Han chauvinism. The state (or Central Government) was supposed to guarantee equality among nationalities - for instance, by not imposing Chinese language over a 'nationality language' such as Tibetan.

Phunwang was finally rehabilitated at the end of the 1970s. In the early-1980s he managed to send a 25,000-character memo to senior party leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. He stressed that the outcome of a debate on the question of nationality would have a huge impact on future work in 'minority nationality areas' such as Tibet.

After Hu Yaobang and Deng Xiaoping instructed officials not to remove him as a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, his stand seems vindicated.

In May 1980, a delegation headed by Hu Yaobang, then General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, visited Lhasa. Hu Yaobang was shocked to see the level of poverty in Tibet. During a meeting with the party cadre, he asked "whether all the money Beijing had poured into Tibet over the previous years had been thrown into the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river". He said the situation reminded him of colonialism. Soon hundreds of Chinese Han cadre were transferred back to China and Tibetan language rehabilitated. Tibet witnessed a few years of glasnost.

The debate started by Mao's remark more than 50 years ago and reignited by Phunwang 20 years later, is still on. Will Mr Hu Jintao and his colleagues listen to Phunwang's point on the issue of nationalities? Or will great Han chauvinism continue to prevail?



United in adversity: Unlike Tibetans, the Kashmiri Pandits remain a divided lot



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