

HISTORICAL STATUS OF TIBET *

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In the Seventh and Eighth Centuries A. D. Tibet emerges as a mighty military power often carrying raids and expeditions into India and China. In 763 the Tibetans captured Sian (Chang-an), the then capital of China and for nearly seventy years (781-848) they ruled the Tun-huang region. Tibet's eminence as a great power was attained under the line of her Religious Kings (Song-tsen-Gam-po to Ral-pa-chen, circa 620-820) who enacted a veritable renaissance in the life and thought of the country by invention of an alphabet (based on Indic Brahmi script), introduction of Buddhism (Mahayana) and systematic patronage of literature and fine arts. Tibet became an active agency of a new civilization all over the highlands of Asia. In the process, however, her military spirit and ancient skill in war far from making any proportionate progress declined. Besides in the reaction against the apostasy of king Lang Darma (d. 842) the monarchy became discredited, the central power collapsed and the country was parcelled into numerous lay and monastic principalities.

Thus when (1200) the Mongols launched their world conquests from the Altai Karakoram, Tibet — though intellectually and culturally quite ripe to be the teacher and the priest of the Mongols — was quite unfit to ward off the Mongol menace. The Tibetan chiefs bought peace with Jenghiz Khan by despatch of a joint delegation with an offer of submission (1207). Within thirty years Tibet captured her captor; the abbots of Sakya sect converted the Mongol imperial family to Buddhism and the Sakya Lama became the priest of the Mongol Emperor (1230-1244), sometime later the Sakya Lama was recognized by Kublai

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Khan as the ruler of Central Tibet. The Mongols were then engaged in a permanent conquest of Northern China. In 1278 the Chinese Sung Dynasty was finally overthrown and Kublai Khan became the Emperor of China. The relation between the Mongol Emperor and the Sakya Lama, which was anterior to the Mongol conquest of China and the transfer of Mongol metropolis to Peking, continued as before. The Mongol dynasty in China was supplanted by a Chinese (Ming) dynasty in 1368.

The Mongol chiefs in Mongolia and Chinese borderlands however continued active contact with Tibetan Lamas. A new sect called Gelugpa (Yellow), founded by Tsong-khapa who came from Koko Nor region (a region just adjacent to Mongolia), gained the devotion of these Mongol chiefs; the Sakya Lamas meanwhile declined both in power and prestige. The third Gelugpa hierarch visited (1578) Mongolia and converted the leading chief Altan Khan, the well-known scourge of Chinese (Ming) emperors. Altan Khan called the Gelugpa hierarch Dalai Lama and recognized the Dalai Lama as the ruler of Central Tibet. In 1644 a foreign (Manchu) dynasty overthrew the Mings. The Manchus immediately sought to participate in Tibetan politics. The Mongol Khan (Gusri) acted swiftly and confirmed the Dalai Lama (the Fifth) as an independent ruler (1645).

The Manchus had evinced interest in Tibet even before they had settled in Peking. Gusri Khan incident taught them that the central power in Tibet was the Dalai Lama. Besides, the Manchu felt, the institution of Dalai Lama had a special usefulness. The Mongols in Mongolia and elsewhere held the Dalai Lama in high respect. Manchu (and not Chinese) imperial interest thus necessitated a close relation with the Dalai Lama. In 1652 the Dalai Lama was persuaded to call upon the Manchu Emperor in Peking. While the wise Manchu received the Dalai Lama as the King of Tibet, the court annalists recorded, in typical Chinese manner, that the Lama came to pay homage. The Manchu (then nationalized as Ching) Emperor became paramount authority for Tibet only in the 1720s when succession disputes regarding the office of the Dalai Lama and dissensions between Tibetans and Mongols induced and called for foreign intervention. For a little over one hundred years the Manchu or Ching paramountcy was a fact though Tibet never became a part of Chinese territory. In 1855, when the Gurkhas invaded Tibet, the paramountcy had liquidated itself by

corruption and inefficiency, and Tibet had to fend for itself. Powers other than the Manchu Emperor were then looming large on the horizon of Tibet; Britain and Russia had by that time become neighbours of Tibet. The ghost of Manchu paramountcy was laid in 1911 with the Expulsion of the Manchus.

II

The relationship between the Manchu Emperor and the Dalai Lama was a patron-priest relationship following the precedent of Altan Khan and the Gelugpa hierarch or Kublai Khan and the Sakya hierarch. It involved two personalities possessing the same faith, one its exponent and priest and the other its lay devotee and protector. It did not involve any confederation, to use a modern term, between the two countries. The relationship had produced a firm political superiority, call it hegemony or paramountcy, for the patron, that is, the Manchu Emperor, only for about a century and a quarter from 1720. This paramountcy was dead from the middle of the Nineteenth Century. When in 1911 the Manchu Empire fell, the Manchu dynasty was expelled from Peking and a republican regime was set up, the theoretical paramountcy of the Manchu Emperor over the Dalai Lama was automatically liquidated. That the republican regime in China could keep alive the doctrine of paramountcy was not a little due to the British diplomacy in Asia. It is therefore necessary to describe this phenomenon.

British Government in India and their controlling authorities in London had a dread of Russian expansion all over the highlands of Asia not excluding Tibet; this dread had its justification in British point of view. In contacting the the Dalai Lama or Tibetan authorities, Russia had a decided advantage over Britain. Among her motley population, Russia counted a good number of Buddhists (Buriats and Kalmuks) who made frequent trips, for pilgrimage as well as trade, to Lhasa as to Urga (Ulan Bator). In the second half of the Nineteenth Century the Mongols were gravitating from the Manchus to the Romanovs. Would the Bodpas (Tibetans) follow the same line?

A primary reason for British contact with Tibet was to open China and to trade with China from the west by overland. Britain's anxiety was to trade with China, and not with Tibet so much, so as to turn the adverse balance of

eastern trade. When Britain did eventually open China and gained substantial advantages by the Treaty of Nanking (1842) Tibet took a second place in the Far Eastern diplomacy of Britain. The British diplomats in China got the Chinese point of view about China's interests and affairs in Central Asia. Verbiage and bombast of Chinese annals and archives were not altogether unknown to the British in China; they had discovered in the list of tributaries of the Manchu dynasty the following entries - Britain, Holland, Portugal and Russia besides the Pope. Nevertheless, the British in their own interests accepted the Chinese doctrine of Tibet as a vassal state,

In 1876 Britain made a treaty with China for exploration across Tibet, from India to China or from China to India. When some years later Britain proposed to despatch a mission Tibet flatly refused. Since China could not help in the matter Britain sent the proposed mission equipped with a military escort. It led to an armed conflict with Tibet inside the territories of Sikkim. It was now a matter of 'face' for China. The upshot was the curious treaty of 1890 regarding Sikkim. It not only assumed that China was paramount power over Tibet but also that directly or through Tibet, China could decide the Sikkim-Tibet borders. Britain gave away Chumbi valley which was an integral part of Sikkim and the nucleus of the kingdom of Sikkim.

Britain was all out to recognize China as the paramount authority for Tibet and Tibetan affairs. Tibet left alone might be victim of Russian expansionism. Therefore the shadow of Chinese paramountcy, called suzerainty by Britain, was made to lengthen over the land of Lamas. But such fiction alone could not guarantee the security which Britain looked for. China again failed to enable Britain to establish trading rights in Tibet as in the mainland of China. On the other hand, Russian agents could visit Tibet rather often. So in 1903-4, an armed mission was despatched to Lhasa. Tibetans put up resistance, admittedly ill-equipped and unorganized. The British Mission reached Lhasa on August 3, 1904 and dictated a treaty on September 7, 1904. China was not there to protect the vassal state and the provisions of the two Anglo-Chinese Conventions (1890 & 1893) had to be ratified by this treaty between Britain and Tibet. That was ample evidence that China had ceased to be paramount power with Tibet.

Yet a year and a half later (April 1906) Britain raised the suzerainty issue and made a treaty with China regarding Tibet in confirmation of Anglo-Tibetan Treaty (September 1904). If however China was in reality the suzerain, the Anglo-Chinese Treaty (April 1906) should have been the last word about Tibet. But in 1907 (August 31) Britain and Russia concluded a treaty regarding each other's intentions and interests not only about Persia and Afganistan but also Tibet. The real issue was not Chinese suzerainty but Anglo-Russian conflict.

Even after the Anglo-Russian Entente, Britain remained anxious about Russian intentions and continued to oppose Tibet *vis-a-vis* China. When, during his exile in India (1910-12) the 13th Dalai Lama solicited British support for Tibetan independence, British authorities told him that His Majesty the King Emperor "regrets that he is unable to interfere between Dalai Lama and his suzerain".

The Chinese Revolution, called Expulsion of the Manchu, broke out in 1911. The remnants of Manchu troops in Tibet were repatriated to China under the auspices of British Government in India (1912). The Dalai Lama returned from India and entered Lhasa in January 1913. The Patron-Priest relationship was now lost for ever. The Dalai Lama made a formal declaration of independence.

Shortly afterwards, news of a treaty concluded in January 1913 between Tibet and Mongolia (which had become fully independent of Manchu Empire in 1911) reached the outside world. Britain sought to reject the report as unfounded and later the treaty as invalid, since Tibet was "not independent" and thus not capable of making treaties. The real reason for British opposition was the attainment of Mongolian independence under Russian support and its likely repercussions on Tibet.

Yet in keeping with facts of the matter, Britain sat in a tripartite conference (Simla 1913-14) with China and Tibet "to settle by mutual agreement various questions concerning the interests of their several States on the Continent of Asia". When at the end of the deliberations, Chinese delegate refused to sign the entire agreement because of the inacceptability of the clauses regarding the Sino-Tibetan frontier, Britain and Tibet signed the Convention and jointly declared China debar-

red from the privileges accruing from the Convention. Among such benefits was the recognition of China's suzerainty over Tibet.

Such was the position till the rise of Japanese expansionism in the 1930s when both Britain and the United States were engaged in aiding and propping up China. It thus became a fair proposition, in Anglo-American view, to ignore the independence of Tibet and to strengthen the status of China on all fronts.

During the War (1939-45) China was admitted into the counsels of the leading Allies. In the Pacific Council in Washington (1943) the British Prime Minister (Winston Churchill) assured China that "no one contests Chinese suzerainty". The British Foreign Minister (Anthony Eden) followed this in an explanatory memorandum that China's suzerainty over Tibet was not unconditional or absolute.

The Tripartite Convention (Simla 1914) recognized China's suzerainty over Tibet but had determined its limitations in no uncertain terms. Thus the autonomy of Outer Tibet (that is, Tibet under Dalai Lama's rule) was recognized, its territorial integrity confirmed and non-interference in its administration guaranteed. China engaged not to convert Tibet into a Chinese province and not to send troops to Tibet. Tibet had never accepted the British theory of Chinese suzerainty and when China failed to ratify the Tripartite Convention, Britain and Tibet by a joint declaration debarred China from the benefits of the Convention. It is therefore not a little curious that nearly 30 years after this Britain spoke of (nominal) Chinese suzerainty.

III

The term suzerainty does not feature as a firm and precise category in the minds of jurists and is not capable of an absolute definition. In practice as well as in theory its content has varied in the relations between different European powers who all inherited concepts and usages of Roman jurisprudence. In the context of Asia the very application of the term suzerainty was liable to be inappropriate and confusing. The patron-priest relationship between the Manchu Emperor and the Dalai Lama was not a matter to be identified with any concept of Roman or European jurisprudence.

The Manchu Emperor, or his government at Peking, exercised suzerainty in Tibet in modern Western sense, that is, beyond the field of patron-priest relationship, only once. This was in 1909-10 when after some years of preparation the Chinese launched an invasion of Tibet. This was, the Chinese said, to reform the administration. The reformist activities of the army of occupation were however characterized by so much excess that Chao Erh-feng, the commander of the expedition, earned the sobriquet Butcher. Before the expedition reached Lhasa the Dalai Lama left for India and sought asylum with the British Government. While the Dalai Lama declared that the patron-priest relationship had ended with the invasion, the Chinese deposed him. The Tibetans put up a total non-cooperation with the Chinese and even the Panchen Lama refused to head a temporary administration. The Chinese found that it was a grave blunder to depose the Dalai Lama. The revolution in China broke out shortly and the Dalai Lama returned. He now made a formal declaration that he was ruler of Tibet under the orders of the Buddha. The Dalai Lama XIII ruled for the rest of his life (1913-33) as an independent ruler and gave no quarters to any theory of suzerainty-British or Chinese.

The Tibetan contention that China had no suzerainty over Tibet finds support from certain undisputed facts.

Tibet was not bound by any treaties or agreements which China made with any third power. Tibet thus flatly refused to abide by the Anglo-Chinese agreements (1876, 1890 & 1893) and the rights which Britain obtained under these agreements had to be validated by the Lhasa Convention (1904).

Chinese visas did not enable foreigners entry into Tibet. This was as true of the last decades of the Nineteenth Century, when Rockhill, Bonvalot and others had to resort to other means, as of the Second World War when U. S. officials found their Chinese visas useless. In 1939 Tibet refused admission to a Chinese diplomat (Wu Chung Hsin) even. On the other hand Tibetan passports had validity abroad.

China's participation in the War did not involve Tibet; Tibet remained neutral and in spite of strong pressure from Britain and U.S.A. refused passage for arms supply to China.

For all this we have to go back to 1913 when Republican China agreed to sit at Simla Conference with Tibet as a treaty-making power; Tibet's sovereignty was thereby admitted.

Inferences have been drawn from the institution of tributes to the Manchu court. Whatever were the implications of such practice, no tributes were despatched after the Manchus went out.

There were no Ambans (Chinese Residents) during the sovereign regime of the Dalai Lama XIII (1913-33). On his death a delegation came from Peking to mourn and managed to dig in under one plea or other. The successive Chinese Commissioners could not however make Tibet an integral part of China as was clearly borne out by Tibet's neutrality during the War. In 1949 the Chinese Mission was expelled.

Tibet as an independent country had its own currency and customs, its own postal service and telegraph and its own civil service and its own army.

In 1950 China, that is, the People's Republic of China, invaded Tibet and placed it under regular military occupation. By the Sino-Tibetan Treaty of 1951 (May 23) Tibet was made to surrender its independence to China. Tibet became Tibet Region of China.

The requirement of a treaty bore eloquent testimony to the historical status of Tibet. The claims of "liberation" were intrinsically insufficient to regularize what was an annexation. Remedy lay in the formality of an "agreement" between the so-called great motherland (China) and the so-called national minority (Tibet).