

A reality check on Tibet

By Amit Baruah

India should have little hesitation in accommodating Chinese sensitivities on Tibet.

IT IS time to open up. The Tibet Autonomous Region of China is on the move. A cooperative relationship between India and China can bring enormous benefits to people on both sides of the border. The border trade agreement signed in June 2003 between India and China, through Sikkim and the TAR, needs to be implemented at the earliest. People-to-people contact in the form of a Gangtok-Lhasa bus service or a New Delhi-Lhasa flight must be promoted.

The Chinese today are keen on showcasing their achievements in Tibet — from growth in income to the preservation and restoration of religious and cultural monuments. This is a sign of their rising confidence when it comes to dealing with the rest of the world on Tibet.

If one were to go by TAR Government figures (in the absence of any other statistics), the per capita income of a Tibetan farmer stands at 1,680 Renminbi (\$1 equals 8.21 Renminbi) today. In 1965, it stood at 240 RMB.

Tuden Tsewang, TAR Vice-Chairman, said recently that Tibet had a 41,000-km road network and 80 per cent of all villages had electricity. It has three functioning airports, a fourth is under construction and a fifth is in the planning stage.

Ninety 90 per cent of the children have been admitted to schools. Life expectancy stood at 67 years in 2003 as opposed to 35 in the early 1960s. In 1965 (the year TAR was formed by China), the Tibetan population stood at 1.2 million while the figure was 2.5 million according to 2003 figures.

Infrastructure and agriculture are two areas on which the TAR is focussed. A senior official from the Shannan Prefecture (the prefectures of Ali, Shigatse, Nagchu, Nyingtiri, and Chamdo along with the municipality of Lhasa constitute the rest of TAR), Tsam Trom, told Indian journalists that her province was actively engaged in attracting investment from other parts of China into Tibet since the area had few industries.

Like the rest of China, construction is booming in TAR. It is evident that the Chinese Central Government and the Communist Party leadership have focussed on Tibet and its

development. Billions of RMB have been poured into TAR.

Forty-two years after China's border conflict with India and 45 years after the Dalai Lama fled to India, India and Indians must come to terms with the fact that Beijing is the route through which New Delhi must deal with Lhasa.

This correspondent, who visited Tibet recently as part of an Indian press delegation invited by the official China Association for Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture, flew to Beijing from New Delhi and then on to Chengdu and Lhasa. There was a clear message in the route chosen. We could have, for instance, taken the more direct flight path from New Delhi to Kathmandu and then on to Lhasa. But we did not and neither did our Chinese hosts suggest it.

It was an indication that while India and China address their long-standing border dispute and even open up trade through Tibet and Sikkim, the Chinese Central Government has residual suspicions about Indian intentions *vis-à-vis* Tibet. There is little doubt that the continuing presence of the Dalai Lama's "government-in-exile" in Dharmasala have much to do with this.

Considerable effort has gone into consolidating China's hold on Tibet. In Beijing, the Assistant Minister for the China Association, Zhu Weigun, told us that in the last five years the Chinese Central Government had provided 69.1 billion RMB to TAR, of which 37.9 billion RMB was in the form of subsidies. Another two billion RMB had come from other provinces.

"There is no ceiling on Central assistance. Such preferential policies [as towards TAR] don't exist for other provinces," Mr. Zhu, a former journalist with the *People's Daily*, stated.

It is evident that if India wants to enhance linkages with Tibet, there has to be an increase in comfort levels as far as China is concerned. For the Chinese, the Dalai Lama and the considerable support that he enjoys

in the West are not just a problem for Tibet, but for the larger question of Taiwan being a part of China.

Official after official repeated to us what the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, said in an interview to the *Washington Post*, on the Dalai Lama and Tibet in November 2003: "So long as he genuinely abandons his position on seeking Tibetan independence and publicly recognises Tibet and Taiwan as inalienable parts of Chinese territory, then contacts and discussions between him and the Central Government can resume. The door to communication between the Central Government and the Dalai Lama is wide open."

To the credit of the former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and his foreign policy team, Indian formulations on Tibet during his June 2003 visit to China seem to have partly addressed Beijing's concerns on the issue.

The Chinese feel that India for the first time explicitly recognised TAR to be part of the territory of the People's Republic of China in the joint declaration issued on June 25, 2003: "The Indian side recognises that the Tibet Autonomous Region is part of the territory of the People's Republic of China."

However, during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's celebrated visit to Beijing in 1988 India reiterated the "long-standing and consistent policy of the Government of India that Tibet is an autonomous region of China."

In 1954, the title of the accord signed between India and China said everything it had to on India's idea of the status of Tibet: "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Trade and Inter-Course between Tibet Region of China and India."

The key phrase here is "Tibet Region of China." In a sign that the India-China honeymoon was on, the 1954 agreement spoke of the Chinese establishing trade agencies in New Delhi, Calcutta and Kalimpong and India at Yatung, Gyantse and Gartok.

Article V of the Treaty said, "Traders of both countries known to be customarily and specifically engaged in trade between the Tibet region of China and India, their wives and children, who are dependent on them for livelihood and their attendants will be allowed entry for purposes of trade into India or the Tibet region of China, as the case may be, in accordance with custom on the production of certificates duly issued by the local Government of their own country by its duly authorised agents and examined by the border check posts of the other party."

"Inhabitants of the border districts of the two countries, who cross borders to carry on petty trade or to visit friends and relatives, may proceed to the border districts of the other party as they have customarily done heretofore."

Much has changed since 1954, but today India and China have yet another opportunity to drive their relations into a new and exciting phase. With bilateral trade on the increase and expected to reach the \$10 billion figure this year, the onus is on both Beijing and New Delhi to take their relations to a higher level.

And, for that, contacts between India and the Tibet Region are essential.

India recognised the realities of Tibet 50 years ago. Today there is little doubt that TAR and other parts of the Tibetan plateau are firmly under the sovereignty and control of the Chinese Central Government.

Not many in India are aware of the nuances that governments might employ from time to time when it comes to the finer points of diplomatic expression. The "burden of 1962" is history.

The fact of the matter is that Tibet is not a card that India can play. It is a part of China. However, if Chinese comfort levels can be enhanced by the choice of words, then India should have little hesitation in using them in return for Chinese recognition of ground realities elsewhere.

India and Tibet have a long history of association and intercourse. It is time a modern, forward-looking form of these linkages took firm root between India and China's Tibet.

Panchen Lama free: China

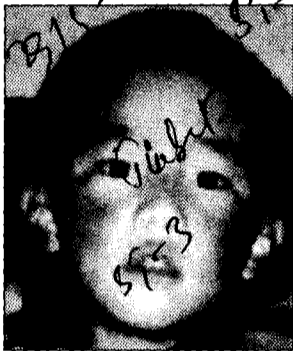
The Times, London

BEIJING, May 28. — A Tibetan boy chosen by the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama, the second highest leader in Tibetan Buddhism, is well and living with his family, China has said.

The State Council said yesterday that Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, now 16, who was snatched from his home by Chinese guards soon after he was chosen at the age of seven, is "free", without revealing his exact whereabouts.

"His health condition is good and he is living a normal and happy life and receiving a good education," it said.

Beijing maintains that Gedhun is not the real Panchen Lama, and that he was chosen arbitrarily in 1995 by the Dalai Lama. Uniquely for a Communist



The Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima.

government committed to atheism, Beijing later selected its own Panchen Lama by drawing lots from a traditional golden urn.

In a policy document on Tibet, the State Council said: "(Gedhun Choekyi Nyima) is not the Panchen Lama... He is only an ordinary Chinese child, the same as other children."

Regardless of what Beijing says, the boy is is

considered a living god by many Tibetans. Even today activists regularly hold protests demanding to know his whereabouts.

Tibetan monks and Western diplomats suspect that Gedhun was under house arrest to prevent him from leaving China.

The departure of the Panchen Lama from China would be a political disaster for Beijing. As long as Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is under its control, the Chinese government can continue to present Gya-incain Norbu, its choice as Panchen Lama, as the genuine reincarnation.

The Panchen Lama's status is especially significant as he traditionally chooses the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Potentially, then Beijing could appoint its own Dalai Lama without consulting Gedhun.

Dalai Lama fails to meet Blair

LONDON, May 28. — The Dalai Lama met with British foreign secretary Mr Jack Straw and Prince Charles but not with Mr Tony Blair.

The Foreign Office said the Dalai Lama and Mr Straw discussed Tibet when they met yesterday at the minister's office in the House of Commons. But a spokesman declined to provide further details.

Mr Blair has faced criticism for failing to meet the Dalai Lama during his visit to Britain. In Parliament on Wednesday, a legislator asked Mr Blair if the Chinese government had told him not to meet with the Dalai Lama. Mr Blair said no, adding that he had met the spiritual leader before and would be "happy" to do so again, on a day when he was less busy. — AP

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Dalai to send envoy to Taiwan

Agence France Presse (1) 202 25.3.03

TAIPEI, May 16. — The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, is to send an envoy to Taiwan for Chen Shui-bian's presidential inauguration this week, an official said today, in a move likely to anger rival China.

Mr Kasur Tashiwangdi, the Dalai Lama's former representative to New Delhi, will attend the Thursday's inauguration to congratulate Chen, Presidential Office spokesman Huang Chih-fang said. "Mr Tashiwangdi will meet with president Chen," Huang told AFP.

The spokesman also said the Dalai Lama had written to Chen to voice his sympathy when he and his deputy, Annette Lu, were shot on the eve of the March 20 presidential polls. They were slightly wounded in the shooting.

The Dalai Lama is labelled a "splittist" by China, which has been occupying Tibet since 1951. He fled Tibet in 1959 and has formed a government in exile in Dharamsala. He once called for Tibetan independence but has since adopted a conciliatory approach, instead demanding large-scale autonomy for the region.

China also accuses Taiwan of trying to formally split from the mainland. The island has been ruled separately from the rest of China since the end of a civil war in 1949, and Beijing, which considers it a breakaway province, has declared it would invade if Taiwan declared independence or descended into chaos.