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## **An Exiled Tibetan Non-Violent Movement: A Geopolitical and Historical Analysis**

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### **ARTICLE DETAILS**

#### **Research Paper**

Accepted on: 15-02-2025

Published on: 14-03-2025

#### **Keywords:**

*People's Republic of China (PRC), Tibet, Buddhism, India, Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi*

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### **ABSTRACT**

India gained independence through Gandhi's nonviolent movement, a strategy that later influenced Tibetan resistance against Chinese occupation. After the Chinese Communist Party seized power in 1949, Mao Zedong pursued expansionist policies, leading to the invasion of Tibet. The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama fled to India, where he embraced and promoted nonviolence as a core principle of Tibetan Buddhism. While nonviolence was not historically central to Tibetan resistance, it gained prominence under the Dalai Lama's leadership. In 1944, a Tibetan delegation attended the Afro-Asian Conference in Delhi, where Gandhi rejected a Chinese-manufactured Khata, emphasizing self-reliance. This encounter deeply influenced the Dalai Lama, who later pledged to nonviolence at Gandhi's cremation site during Buddha's 2500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. In his autobiography, he reflected on the guidance Gandhi might have offered him. Today, Tibetans continue to uphold Gandhi's ideals of truth and nonviolence in their struggle against Chinese oppression. Meanwhile, China has transformed Tibet into a militarized zone, recognizing its strategic, developmental, and environmental significance. Tibet serves as a vital resource base, crucial to China's national and ecological security. My research examines Tibet's nonviolent movement through a geopolitical and historical lens, analyzing its impact and challenges. This study is based on academic journals, international news, and government documents, offering

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**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15026118>**

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## **Introduction**

Tibet, also called 'The roof of the world' (Hopkirk, 2001), or the 'forbidden land' (Landor, 1898) is known for its mysteries, the snow-capped mountains, and lamas (teachers of the dharma) practising Tibetan Buddhism. The land was untouched and isolated from the rest of the world for a long time because of its harsh geographical terrain, difficult approach, isolated location, and high mountains. Located in the south-west of China, and bordered by Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK), the Tibetan plateau lies in the center of Asia, constituting the highest areas on the earth. Tallest mountains of the world, such as Mount Everest, K2, (also called Mount Godwin Austen), and Kanchenjunga, abode in its lap. Tibet is home to an untapped source of minerals, water and the plateau is counted as the world's 'Third Pole', the 'Water Tower of Asia'. A large number of mineral deposits like uranium, chromite, boron, lithium, borax, and iron are known to exist underneath its earth. Some of the greatest rivers of Asia, the Indus, Brahmaputra, Mekong, Sutlej, Salween, Yangtze, and Huang, originate from Tibet. The largest lake in China, Qinghai Lake, located in Tibet, is the origin point of the two long rivers, i.e., the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers (Ryavec, 2015 & Allen, 2013). Due to its geographical position, Tibet has strategic, developmental, and environmental importance. Tibet has existed as an autonomous territory, sometimes acting as a sovereign state for a long time in history. China claims it as its integral and inherent part. Traditionally inhabited exclusively by Tibetans, today the population in Tibet outnumbers roughly 6 million Tibetans (W.D Shakhpa, 1984). The annals of history reveal that the Tibetans never accepted to be part of China (Dotson, 2009). During the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1912), which preceded the Republic of China, the Tibetan government conducted its foreign affairs, maintained its army, coined its currency, and exercised complete sovereignty in all its affairs. This sovereign use of its powers continued till the Chinese invasion of Tibet on 7th October 1950. Thence before, Tibet had been a theocratic state and seat of Lamaism guided by the two grand lamas, the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama (Waddell, 2007). Due to its geopolitical significance, China considers Tibet of great importance for its national security and ecological security, as an important reserve base for strategic resources and agricultural products, due to its unique ethnic culture, a popular tourist destination. China's access to Central Asia through Tibet and Tibet's centrality to President Xi Jinping's pet project, 'One Belt, One Road', also makes it a 'strategic focal point' for Chin. Some



Chinese sources have recently mentioned creating the Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), which may not be possible without Tibet. India has a long history of cultural influence over Tibet, “South Asia’s proximity to Tibet has made the region extremely important for China”(Aryal, 2021). Since the enthronement of Nyatri Tsenpo, the first king of the Yarlung Dynasty, in 127 B.C, Tibet did not possess its script until 640 A.D. The only source of the Tibetan culture was the Buddhist religion, else, without a writing system, Tibet lacked a cultural tradition. Buddhism went from India to Tibet, and Tibetans regarded it as the land of all that is noble in thought and deed (Kuzmin, 2011). Tibet’s religion, philosophy, art, and poetry show deep Indian influences. The monastic tradition, translation of Sanskrit, and Pali works from India into Tibet are glowing examples of how the stream of Indian consciousness crossed the Himalayan frontiers and flowed into Tibet (Pollock, 2011 & Kapstein, 2003). While India undeniably had religious, cultural, and linguistic influences over Tibet, “China claimed it absorbed Tibet about 800 years ago during the Yuan Dynasty” (Elliot Sperling, 2004). It was made an inseparable part of China. Further, the Chinese viewed that no country had recognised Tibet as an independent state ever since. At the turn of the 20th century, ‘the Great Game’ between Britain and the Czarist Russia lead the British to bring Tibet into its sphere of influence, “Curzon believed that, like the north-west frontier, Tibet had become a board for the ‘Great Game’, and in the Younghusband mission to Lhasa in 1904 he staked Britain’s claim there (Neville Maxwell, 1970). The British refused to recognise China’s sovereignty over Tibet. The British also pushed their arms into Tibet in the form of its military expedition there in 1904, which caused the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (Thubten Gyatso) to flee to Mongolia for some time. China deposed him and declared its sovereignty over Tibet in his absence, which was neither acceptable to Dalai Lama nor the British. It resulted in the 1904 treaty between Great Britain and Thibet (Tibet), “The Lhasa Convention, signed as a result of that mission, bound the Tibetans to refuse entry to the representatives or agents of any foreign power, other than Britain, and so, it seemed, ensured that Tibet would remain in what the British saw as ‘that state of isolation from which, till recently, she had shown no intention to depart, and which hitherto caused her presence on our frontier to be a matter of indifference to us’(Lamb Alastair, 1960). The British, among other things, agreed not to annex Tibet and China got assurance of non-interference by the British or any other foreign power into the internal administration of Tibet. China’s role became minimal as its troops were ordered out of Tibet, and it declared itself independent in 1913. Even though Dalai Lama was concerned about Tibetan autonomy. As a powerful player in the region, the British called the Shimla Convention of 1914. The McMahon Line as a defining boundary between British India and Tibet was drawn and agreed upon even though the Chinese government didn't agree with it. However, a boundary line



between China and Tibet could not be agreed upon at the convention. The British recognised Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. After India's independence, the government of India also agreed to the same position. India also continued the supply of arms and training. In 1950 China decided to stake claim over Tibet ending Tibet's 38 years of de-facto independence, but there was no sharp reaction from India. While China gradually advanced its claims and physical offensive on Tibet, India under Nehru adopted the policy of conciliation and appeasement. This was evident from the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954 between the two neighbours. China continued to advance its claims vis-s-vis Tibet, and India continued to be defensive, unable to assess the future developments and kept retreating from its position, which emboldened the Chinese stranglehold over Tibet. After the Kham uprising by the Tibetans against China, 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) fled to India in 1959. These developments left the problem unresolved, which continues till today (Hansen, 1996). On its liberation on 1st October 1949, the People's Republic of China commenced and its Communist regime began to interfere in Tibet. The newly established Communist regime in China invaded Tibet with 40,000 troops in 1950. Tibetan government was forced to sign the "Seventeen Point Agreement", which recognised China's rule there in return for promises to protect Tibet's political system and Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetans resisted China's invasion and widespread brutality, which culminated on the 10th of March 1959, when 300,000 Tibetans surrounded the Potala Palace (a Dzong fortress in the city of Lhasa which was the winter palace of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 to 1959), to offer Dalai Lama protection as they feared he might be abducted, arrested or eliminated by the Chinese troops. On March 17, 1959, Dalai Lama, then 23, disguised himself as a soldier and slipped through the crowds outside Potala Palace, to which he would never return. He embarked on a dangerous journey to asylum in India, crossing the Himalayas on foot with an entourage of soldiers and cabinet members. They travelled only at night to avoid detection by Chinese soldiers. Dalai Lama appeared in India, reaching Tezpur in Assam on 18 April, almost two weeks after leaving Lhasa. The Government of India offered Dalai Lama to stay at McLeod Ganj (Himachal Pradesh), a place with a similar climate to high-altitude Tibet. Dalai Lama settled along with his government in exile, and other Tibetans who left Lhasa accompanied him to India (Grunfeld, 1996).

### **Role of Buddhism, Non-Violence and Gandhi in Tibet**

The Indian Buddhist faith more influenced the history of Tibet, India's role toward Tibetan religion, art, and culture could not be diluted, although the Tibetan king had a marital relationship with Nepal and Chinese princes. Discourse related to Tibetan history always gave importance to Buddhism. As we all know, Buddha's primary roots and teachings are associated with India. Therefore, India has a vital role



in flourishing and nurturing Tibetan culture and religion. Historically Yarlung valley lifted Nyatri Tsangpo as the first king of Tibet, and there are different-different stances or narratives on Nyatri Tsangpo, some stated that he originally belonged to the Indian royal family whose roots can be found related to the Buddha's family. Buddhism came into existence in Tibet during the reign of the Yarlung dynasty around the fifth century AD; at that time, 'Thori Nyatsen' was the emperor of the dynasty. Songsten Gampo was the first ruler of the Yarlung dynasty who introduced Buddhism as a state affair of Tibet, or we could state that Tibet advent its first step to becoming a theocratic state or state of the lamas. We should not forget that once Tibet was a strong military power in central Asia, the credibility of Tibetan military power we could examine the instance of Nepal and Chinese emperors making a marital relationship with the Tibetan king, though both the kingdom were never keen to present their daughters to the Tibetan king because they considered Tibetan as a barbarian, they have no choice only acceptance and have a cordial relation.

The Himalayas and Buddhism are correlated with each other in terms of religion and culture. However, the root of Buddhism was somewhere in India, "The world's youngest mountain range, the Himalayas, is home to two of the world's oldest civilisation that is contemporary great power aspires-India and China (Bansal Alok, Aayushi Ketkar, 2019). Nalanda and Vikramashila were the primary teaching centres of Buddhist philosophy and gave propounded Buddhist scholars who propagated Buddhism all over the world. Some famous scholars are Acharya Shantarakshita, Atisha, and Dipamkara, who learned Buddha's teaching and spread virtue wherever he visited. Tibet was one of the places where he not only travelled but also gave teachings of buddha and promulgated the original teachings of Lord Buddha. Subsequently, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Guru Padmasambhava laid down the Tantric Vajrayana form of Buddhism on the roof of the world. In Buddhism, the role of the Guru Padmasambhava was very significant; in the Himalayas, he considers the second Buddha, and he is renowned for his different-different name. In Nepal, he was called Oddiyana Acharya, and in the Himalayas, he was famous for the title of Guru Rinpoche. Gradually the Tantric Vajrayana grabbed its root all over the Himalayas with the great help of Marpa and Milarepa, and it would be not wrong to say that they both spread the Tantric Vajrayana part of Buddhism in the Himalayas. Nyingma, Kagyu, Gelug, and Sakya are the prevalent sects of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and the Himalayan region. After the embracing of Buddhism by the Tibetan ruler in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet went through political transformation and accepted disarmament rather than its cruel nature. Subsequently, Tibet's military power declined in Asia, and they chose the path of sympathy and benevolence. Earlier, Tibet was known for its martial and violent race.



Soon after that, Tibet became the epicentre of Buddha-Dharma. Tibet's hard power was dramatically replaced by soft power, religion was institutionalised, and Buddhism became the state religion. Further, Tibetan Buddhism faces more division, and some new sects come into existence. The four main sects are Nyingma, Gelug, Kaguk and Sakya. Out of the four Nyingma sects is the oldest sect. Later, the Dalai Lama and his institution came into power with the origin of the Gelug sect and three monasteries, Ganden (1409), Drepung (1416), and Sera (1419) played a vital role to flourish Gelugpa all over Tibet. Western scholars mostly portrayed Buddhism with one specific shade, 'Tibetan-Buddhism'. They hardly distinguish sects, creating confusion that should be cleared out. The other confusion is that many related non-violence with Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, non-violence is new terminology in Tibetan culture. Under the 14<sup>th</sup> of his holiness Dalai lama's influence, non-violence became the pivot of Tibetan Buddhist identity. Although non-violence was important in Buddhist philosophy but not regarded as a core value of the religion in the past. At that time, Tibetans treated non-violence and resistance are contradictory to each other. However, Buddhism has far more impact on Tibetan ideology rather than any ideology, apart from that history of violence also coexisted with that. "Kindness and compassion toward sentient beings," writes Elliot Sperling, "are a significant part of Tibetan Buddhism, as is, of course, the idea of working for the benefit of sentient beings. These are not, however, identical to Gandhian ahimsa; nor are they all there is to Tibetan Buddhism in practice." More important than ahimsa was the notion of protecting the Buddhist doctrine, by nonviolent means when possible, and violent means when necessary" (Spring Elliot, p. 319). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all over the world, there was a huge upsurge against the colonial power, and their main weapon against them was non-cooperation and non-violence. Tibet was also not untouched by these waves of non-violence (Ahimsa), Tibetan has shown little interest. One of the utmost incidents happened when the Tibetan delegation went to attend the Afro-Asian conference in Delhi, and the Tibetan delegation offered a khata (white scarf) to M.K Gandhi, he asked in curiosity whether it was a Tibetan made product or not. Unfortunately, the khata (white scarf) was manufactured in China, and Gandhi refused to accept it. He clearly stated that he would like to accept Tibetan own made products rather than Chinese manufactured ones. Gandhi's ideology of non-violence impacted the life of the 14<sup>th</sup>, his holiness Dalai Lama. In 1956 he got the chance to visit India for the 2500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Buddha, the little Dalai Lama visited near cremation ground of Gandhi and made a pledge that "As I stood there, I wondered what wise council the Mahatma would have given me if he had been alive," written by the Dalai Lama years later in his autobiography. "I felt sure he would have thrown all his strength of will and character into a peaceful campaign for the freedom of the people of Tibet, I made up my mind to follow his lead whatever





difficulties might confront me. I determined more strongly than ever that I could never associate myself with acts of violence.” (Dalai Lama, 1962)

### **India-China-Tibet triangle**

As head of the interim government, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru hosted the first Asian Relations Conference (ARC) from March 23 to April 2, 1947, in New Delhi. The Conference marked the emergence of India as an important player in world affairs for the next decade and a half. By organising this conference, India also demonstrated that Asia was awakening and could no longer be considered a marginal player in the post-World War II international order. Nehru invited Tibet despite China's objections, but the Conference evaded discussing the China-Tibet question. The British had considered Tibet as a buffer zone, and at the time of India's independence, Tibet had a de facto independent status under Chinese suzerainty. Just after three months of liberation, on January 1, 1950, China proclaimed through a broadcast that “the task of People's Liberation Army for 1950 is to Taiwan, Hainan and Tibet, creating diplomatic tensions with India. India signed a series of defence treaties with Bhutan (1949), Nepal (1950), and Sikkim (1950), while China continued its military build-up to tame Tibet (Norbu, 1997). Chinese forces entered Tibet on October 7, 1950, and speaking to the Parliament on December 7, Nehru said: “It is not right for any country to talk about its sovereignty or suzerainty over an area outside its immediate range. That is to say since Tibet is not the same as China, it should ultimately be the wishes of the people of Tibet that should prevail and not any legal or constitutional arguments. That, I think, is a valid point”. “Whether the people of Tibet are strong enough to assert their rights or not is another matter. Whether we are strong enough or any other country is strong enough to see that this is done is another matter. But it is a right and proper thing to say, and I see no difficulty in saying to the Chinese government; that whether they have suzerainty over Tibet or sovereignty over Tibet, surely, according to any principles I uphold, the last voice in regard to Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and nobody else” (vifindia.org/2012). In February 1951, Nehru established the North and North-Eastern Defense Committee and visited the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Sikkim, and Bhutan, ensuring support for Nepal and Bhutan and Sikkim in case of Chinese invasion. China treated India's actions as “expansionist”. India, on the other hand, conscious of its lesser military position and to buy long-lasting friendships with China, signed the Panchsheel agreement on April 29, 1954, as an important effort to build economic and security cooperation between the two neighbors. It enunciated the five principles of peaceful co-existence. The agreement was followed by the Chinese first Prime Minister Chou En Lai's visit to India in June 1954, creating bonhomie of “Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai”. Nehru also visited China in



October 1954, and during the talks, he questioned Chinese maps, showing some part of the NEFA and Ladakh region as a part of China (Sinha, 1965). Despite Indian goodwill overtures, the Chinese always expressed their suspicion toward India and that Tibetan Buddhism was functioning under the influence of India. Finally, when Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, China claimed that India incited the rebellion in Tibet. The Chinese occupation of Tibet was one of the historical events that Tibetans cannot easily forget. In 1950 China started its liberation movement all over Tibet (Kham, U-Tsang, Amdo) was one of the victims of that movement. Tibet is an ancient nation with a great empire and around six million population. Still, they are trying to achieve freedom from China, an emerging modern empire with its world's largest population, most significant military power and second largest economy in the world. Where the one side of the world is busy with arms and war races, Tibetans are engaged last long with non-violent movement. They still believe that they will return to their homeland one day, but unfortunately, the 2008 revolt in the capital city of Lhasa created upheaval all over Tibet. World media and scholars observed that the Tibetan movement turned violent; self-immolation was again one of the causes for observers to decide the movement had become violent. The international media cover the issue and show concern that “young Tibetan question the path of non-violence”, “violence in Tibet as monk clash with police” and “Exiles question Dalai Lama non-violence”.

Ever since, Tibet has become the core of the divide between India and China and an issue that fuels territorial disputes, border tensions, and water feuds. For China, Tibet is the core issue in its relations with India. China, in fact further lays claim to Indian territories based on purported Tibetan ecclesial or tutelary links rather than any professed Han Chinese connection. Therefore, ever since China gobbled down the historical buffer with India in 1950, Tibet has remained the core issue between India and China. The dispute over territory in the Aksai Chin area, and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as a part of southern Tibet, China has made many border incursions in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. The situation worsened after the Doklam standoff in the summer of 2017. Though the Doklam dispute is basically between China and Bhutan India, felt that forcible occupation of the area would potentially threaten its security. China used intimidating tactics, but India stood firm on its ground. Responding to Chinese assertiveness, after 2010, India has stopped making any reference to Tibet being part of China. Both the countries have held about 20 rounds of talks to settle the disputes, but a mutually acceptable solution has eluded them so far. Presence of Tibet's tallest and most influential spiritual leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, in India since 1959 has also created irritation between India and China ever since. China considers Dalai Lama a dangerous separatist and





India has granted him refuge and enjoys a special status here. In Tibet, any sign of loyalty to the Dalai Lama can attract arrests, lengthy sentences, torture, violent crackdowns, etc. His image is banned inside Tibet and Tibetans are not allowed to pray for his long life or publicly praise him. Despite such restrictions, Tibetans remain fiercely loyal to Dalai Lama even after more than 50 years of his departure from Lhasa. Due to the large presence of Tibetans and the Dalai Lama in India, China always thinks that India is helping them to sustain their struggle for Tibetan independence. This suspicion and mistrust continue although Dalai Lama gave up his support for Tibetan independence in 1974 and only wants China to stop repression against the Tibetan community. Nevertheless, it remains a major issue between India and China, a confusing and difficult problem, a conundrum, the focus of this study. Over the years, China's grip over Tibet has tightened as it has built a strong transportation and communication network through roads and rails and undertaken activities designed to demographically swamp Tibet. It has spent billions of dollars in Tibet to systematic deconstruct Tibetan culture by introducing several measures. Schools have been modernized and in the larger cities Han Chinese have been pumped in. But these developmental changes have brought tensions within Tibetan society, as some seek to benefit from these opportunities such as business, municipal jobs, etc., many others in villages across Tibet struggle to limit the erosion of their heritage. China is a strong economic power and has a huge military capability to crush any rebellion by the Tibetan population. India is not in a position to alter this situation today but these trends could reverse. It is difficult to imagine that the Tibetans will quietly acquiesce in their fate forever. With economic liberalization and fast-changing Chinese society, any liberalisation or turmoil in China due to the political pressures that are building on the current regime can potentially provide the Tibetans albeit with Indian help an opportunity to express their discontent, with unpredictable consequences. China is bringing substantial economic and political changes in Tibet and India is also aware of its interests and choices in dealing with the situation. Tibet touches most of India's border with China and a large number of Tibetans are present on Indian soil, their loyalty to their spiritual guru Dalai Lama and Tibet apart, their loyalty to India as their foster home is quite valuable for India in dealing with China on the issue. The situation may not be favourable to India today but future eventualities of Indian strong position cannot be ruled out. India cannot so easily forget Tibet forever and give away its strong cultural and religious ties with this valuable piece of land. The present study is an attempt to understand Tibet in its geopolitical manifestations and the conundrum it has created between India and China.



## Conclusion

Today India and China are the world's two largest countries, with the two-third growing population globally, as Dibyesh Anand stated, "international Relations preoccupied with the big issues of war and order, power and security. It ignores marginalises and trivialises issues that affect the everyday lives of the majority of the world's population living mostly, though not exclusively, in the so-called third world". Similarly, there is significantly less amount of literature found on Tibetan non-violent struggle. Most research focuses on the tug of war between India and China, although China was not even part of the border sharing earlier. After the Chinese expansionist policy, the Indo-Tibetan border was known as the earlier border. Tibetan Government in Exile shall initiate the negotiating with Beijing, where the Chinese side acknowledges the Tibetan issue vibrantly. Internationally also, after the charismatic leadership of Dalai Lama, there is a vacuum created. Leadership plays a significant role in giving direction to the movement correctly. Without good supervision, the Tibetan struggle will be stagnant. Under the Dalai Lama's leadership, the Tibetan struggle movement internationalises, but after his political retirement, the Tibetan movement faces a steady growth. However, Tibetan Government in Exile tried to coordinate the movement from Dharamshala centrally, and they even got some excellent results, but in front of China, they need to strengthen more. Although the Indian government are very much concerned about the Tibetan issue and from the time-to-time government of India coordinates with Tibetan Government in Exile. Despite China's allegation and the criticism Indian government helped the Tibetans on humanitarian bases, which worldwide recognised and praised the Indian government's stand.

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