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A Tibetan window into the twentieth-century Himalayan world

Une fenêtre tibétaine sur le monde himalayen du xx^e siècle

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A Tibetan window into the twentieth-century Himalayan world

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Swati Chawla

[The] future of Asia depends on the goodwill and
neighbourly relations among Asiatic countries,
and of these China and India must obviously play
a dominant role.

— Jawaharlal Nehru, 1948¹

We Tibetans used to call Jawaharlal Nehru
'Chola² Nehru.' *Chola* means brother...and in more
senses than one, he became so.

—The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso,
1975³

If you will come to our country,
We will put our golden saddle on our finest horse,
In our golden platter with a silver lid,
We will serve you.

There is no other sentient being like you,
And you are worth this grand welcome.

— Song welcoming the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to
Turtuk village in Baltistan, 2005 (Palsang 2009)

Introduction

- 1 Histories of migration on the Indian subcontinent in the twentieth century have emphasised the mass migration leading up to and following the Partition of British India into two nation-states on the one hand, and the formation of a large South Asian diaspora in Europe and North America on the other (Jalal 2014, Jayal 2013, Kapoor 2022, Roy 2016, Zamindar 2007). Recent studies have analysed the impact of this migration on

regimes of citizenship-making and policies regarding refugees and other migrants (Kapur 2010, Rai and Reeves 2011). However, they have not been sufficiently attentive to the longer history of customary movement across the subcontinent's Himalayan region, and how this migration was impacted on by the formation of the Republic of India (1947) and the People's Republic of China (1949) on either side of the mountain range. The region includes large areas of northern and eastern India, as well as the countries Nepal and Bhutan, and the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim which became part of India in 1975. Historians studying South Asian nation-states have pointed to the role of itinerant religious men and women (and their organisations) in shaping the present political landscape (Chatterjee 2013, Dhulipala 2015, Gilmartin 1988). It has been pointed out in recent work that contemporary nation-states are plagued with colonial amnesia about these precolonial models of multiple, layered and polycentric sovereignties organised through religious patronage, which historian Indrani Chatterjee has characterised as 'monastic governmentality' (Chatterjee 2015). These monastic complexes scattered across the Tibetan cultural region spanned present-day central and western Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and eastern, north-eastern and northern India; the 'monastic geographies' tied together the region's householders, monastics, tax collectors and rulers through 'Hindu', 'Buddhist' and 'Muslim' ideals of gift-giving, movement and 'parivrajaka' or peripatetic renunciation (Chatterjee 2013, van Spengen 2000).⁴

- 2 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama is the most well-known of these renunciants in the contemporary period, but by no means the only one (Chawla 2022c). Tibetan monastics had been coming to India long before he went into exile, including his own predecessor the Thirteenth Dalai Lama who lived in exile in British India from 1910–12. In fact, Tibetans could enter British India without a passport, visa or any entry permit; the same had been true for Indians travelling to Tibet. The British Government had used this concession to make trade deals and political negotiations. The last British political officer in Sikkim, Arthur J Hopkinson, had ruefully observed that 'Tibetans get passport-free entry into India, which is more than the Chinese or French, or I myself get'.⁵
- 3 After Independence, when the government was questioned in the two houses of parliament about its preparedness against the Chinese military presence on India's borders, the deputy minister of external affairs B V Keskar admitted to the porosity of India's borders with Tibet, and the unfinished task of demarcation and of establishing an administration in the Himalaya. He told the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) on 9 February 1951 that the government had no record of the number of Tibetans who had entered India in the last quarter of 1950, or since the Chinese invasion (Anon 2006a: 9). Confronted by the magnitude of political disturbance in Tibet and the increasing numbers of migrants, the Indian government had to reconsider its open border policy for Tibetans. From December 1950, it required that Tibetans obtain a permit for entry and stay in India, and those who were already there were required to register themselves as foreigners. In April 1951, four months after the new regulations had come into effect, over three quarters of current residents (1,433 out of 1,939) and Tibetan newcomers (2,650 out of 2,835) were concentrated in the state of West Bengal, which bordered the kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Despite the change in regulations, entry permits were relatively easy to acquire at the time and the government did not take any particular steps to discourage increasing numbers of

Tibetans coming to India in the wake of political changes in Tibet. A day before the Dalai Lama reached India on 31 March 1959, Nehru pointed out that it was common for Buddhist monks from Ladakh to travel to Lhasa for religious instruction. Four head abbots from Leh were in Lhasa, and anywhere between thirty and a hundred monks were thought to be in Tibet. Nehru was unable to provide specific figures to the Lok Sabha because the monks were not required to register: ‘they simply come and go, and do not report to us’, he said (Anon 2006a, Anon 2006b). The fantasy of solid borders was challenged, as it has always been, by the daily movement of borderlanders in ignorance or breach of them (Gellner 2014, Radhu 2017).

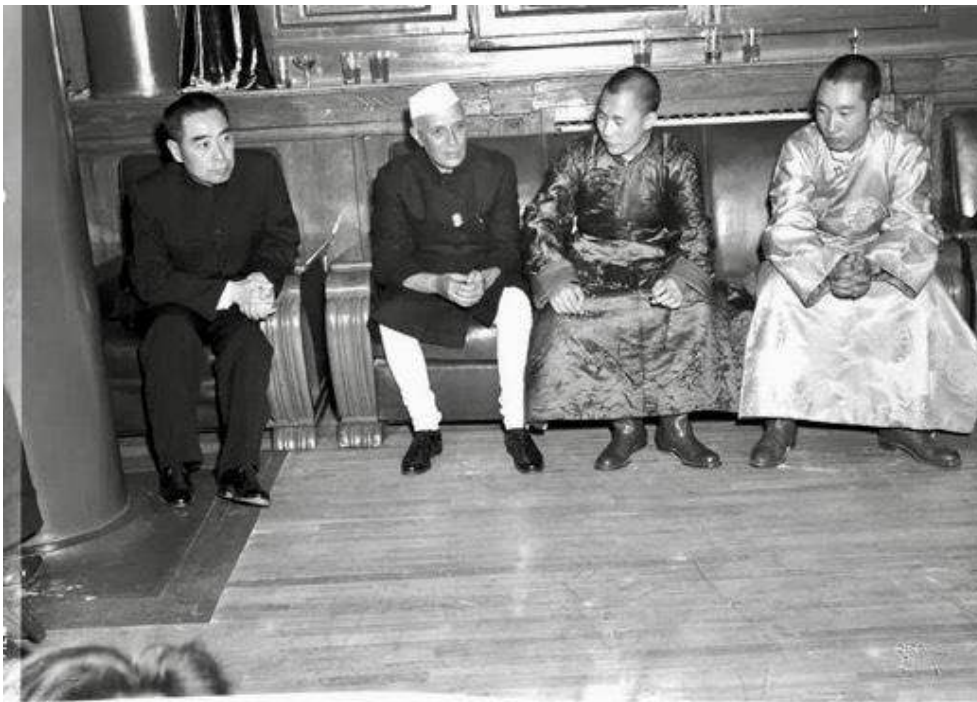
- 4 Some modern lay literature written by Tibetan exiles constructs India as home and depicts refuge in India as a ‘homecoming’ or a return to the birthplace of Buddhism (Chawla 2010). This enabled Tibetans who had relinquished their homeland in Tibet to imagine a home in India.⁶ On the Indian side, archival evidence reveals that an interconnected religious history and the claim of India being the fountainhead of the subcontinent’s Buddhist heritage motivated supporters of the Dalai Lama within the government (and the parliament at large) to muster greater sympathy for the Tibetan cause (Chawla 2023c, Surendran 2024).
- 5 This article examines the interconnections between parts of the Indian Himalaya and Tibet in the period encompassing the escape of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to India in 1959, which had been cultivated in centuries-old networks within families in Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet through monastic patronage, colonial education, intermarriage, seasonal migration and trade. It draws on colonial and postcolonial archival sources from collections in India, the United Kingdom and the erstwhile Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim; oral histories and private papers of Indian political appointees; and a recently published memoir of a Tibetan family whose members lived under Chinese occupation and in exile and who had close ties with the Janus-faced Himalayan world under British colonialism via English boarding schools and intermarriage into Sikkim’s aristocracy. It also makes use of Indian parliamentary proceedings from the first two decades after Independence.
- 6 While the broad theme of interconnections among Tibetan and Himalayan peoples has been extensively studied, the material from Sikkim, Bhutan and Ladakh brings fresh subtleties to the table. Contemporary histories of these regions – and of postcolonial India more broadly – have not been sufficiently attentive to the long history of interconnections with Tibet. The private papers of N K Rustomji, Apa Pant and other Indian appointees in Sikkim and Bhutan introduce a fresh perspective from a newly independent nation-state – different from both British and Indian sources from the colonial period – of undertaking the hitherto unfinished tasks of territorial consolidation (with the integration of princely states) and boundary-making. They also inform us of the long afterlife of precolonial and colonial networks in the lives of Tibetan exiles in the 1950s and 60s, which enriches the histories of Tibet and the Himalaya on the one hand and postcolonial India on the other. The article concludes with a reminder of older histories of syncretism in Ladakh, and the organic and reciprocal expressions of gratitude and reverence towards the Dalai Lama in the Himalaya that transcended on the one hand sectarian, religious and national boundaries, and on the other the rupture caused by his exile. It makes a case for a deeper understanding of contemporary subcontinental history through an appreciation

of interconnected Himalayan histories which have, like the mountains themselves, long been relegated to the fringes.

'Indians had intense feelings about Tibet..'

- 7 On 18 December 1975, over sixteen years after he had come into exile in India, the Dalai Lama spoke of his first meeting with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in an oral history interview with the Gandhian biographer and historian B R Nanda in New Delhi. During the interview, a transcript of which is housed at the Prime Ministers Museum and Library (formerly, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), the Dalai Lama (b 1935) recounted their meeting in Beijing in October 1954, when he was just nineteen years old. Accompanying him was the Tenth Panchen Lama (1938–1989), three years his junior. The two teenage men were the senior-most monks in the Gelug order of Tibetan Buddhism; the Ganden Podrang government led by the Dalai Lama's line of incarnation had governed Tibet since the seventeenth century.⁷ The Lamas were in attendance at a cocktail party as Chinese dignitaries, where Premier Zhou Enlai introduced them to Nehru (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975).⁸

Fig 1: (L-R) Zhou Enlai, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Tenth Panchen Lama in Beijing, October 1954. The Dalai Lama was nineteen years old at the time; the Panchen Lama was sixteen.



Source: Ghosal 2015

- 8 We need only pause at the provenance of their titles to understand their complex position at that meeting between Indian and Chinese dignitaries: *Dalai* is the Mongolian word for 'ocean', while *Panchen* is a portmanteau of 'pan di ta chen po', merging the Sanskrit *pandita* (scholar or expert) and the Tibetan *chen po* (great or supreme).⁹ The Dalai Lama remembered speaking with Nehru via two interpreters, the first of whom translated from Tibetan to Chinese, and the other from Chinese to English. Some

Tibetans among his staff could have translated directly from Tibetan to English, but ‘the Chinese always emphasised that the translation should be through the Chinese interpreters’, he said. The Dalai Lama told Nehru that he was ‘extremely happy to meet him’, and had ‘heard of his fame for many years’. Little else could be said verbally:

I had the impression that he (Nehru) was also moved. He did not speak a word. For a few seconds he just kept silent and was holding my hand. Naturally, I also did not say much. I was also moved, felt very happy and did not know what to say... [T]he deep feelings we felt at the time could not be expressed adequately. It was like meeting a friend you had not met for many years, and then when you meet him you do not know what exactly to say. Then, I think, he said something like this: ‘I am very happy to meet Your Holiness.’ That is all. (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975)

- 9 They met a few other times on that visit, though ‘one Chinese always was present’. With the benefit of hindsight, and now ensconced in the government-in-exile headquartered in India, the Dalai Lama offered an ‘interpretation of this experience’ to the interviewer: he had been in ‘a foreign country’ then, as had Pandit Nehru, and ‘the land was not suitable for showing the true feelings’. The Dalai Lama believed that ‘Indians in general had some intense feelings about Tibet, owing to cultural and religious affinities *from time immemorial*’. Tibetans in turn, ‘*since we are Buddhists*’, ‘*naturally*’ regarded India as a holy place and felt a ‘deep down’ affinity with Indians. Also, ‘Lord Buddha was an Indian’, the Dalai Lama said (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975, added emphases).¹⁰
- 10 Other autobiographical and third-person accounts record the striking affection and deference in his recollections of Nehru (Tenzin Gyatso 1990), who functioned as a synecdoche for India itself – the fountainhead of Buddha dharma, a refuge from persecution, and a guide and confidante: ‘We can never forget his kindness and the right advice he gave. Although we were passing through the darkest period in Tibetan history, we were relieved to find a leader like Pandit Nehru who had so much sympathy for the Tibetan people’ (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975). The Dalai Lama was not alone. Nehru was widely regarded in Tibet as a leader and sympathiser of anti-colonial movements. Leaders of the Tibetan ‘Mimang’¹¹ or ‘Peoples Party’ practically accosted Sikkimese Political Officer Apa B Pant on his visit to Lhasa in 1957 and asked him to relay their ‘deep gratitude and veneration’ for the Indian Prime Minister whom they called ‘Chogyal’ or ‘Dharma Raja’.¹² They believed that Nehru would ‘protect religion not only in Tibet but in the whole outside world’, and India was ‘the only country which can and will help in their plight’.¹³
- 11 The Dalai Lama’s claim of kinship with India and with its pre-eminent nationalist leader might seem surprising when compared with the assertions made by other Himalayan Buddhist nations – Bhutan and Sikkim – about their religious, racial and cultural differences with India at the time. The monarchs of the last two kingdoms claimed kinship with their northern neighbour Tibet, which was the source of their Buddhist faith, and of their political and social customs (Chawla 2022b, 2023a, 2023b). By contrast, the Dalai Lama saw India as the original home of Buddhism and thus a ‘natural’ ally to Tibetans.¹⁴ Bhutan and Sikkim mirrored the racialised characterisation of their peoples as ‘Mongoloids’ and the colonial understanding of their kingdoms as India’s ‘Mongolian fringe’ (Baruah 2013, Caroe 1980) to argue that they were irreconcilably different from India. The Dalai Lama instead stressed Tibetans’ affinity and ‘deep’ affection towards India and Indians, which he believed were reciprocated, and spoke of China as the ‘foreign country’. For him, India had been the consecrated land of dharma ‘from time immemorial’, and starkly contrasted with China (His

Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975). The Dalai Lama has subsequently called himself ‘a son of India’ – for six decades of eating *daal-bhaat* (lentils and rice) have made his body Indian; his mind, instructed by the Nalanda masters of yore, is also Indian (Anon 2016, Chawla and Balasubramaniam 2023, Gandhi 2014).

A view of ‘the Himalayan triangle’¹⁵ from Sikkim

- 12 While Buddhism had been the connecting tissue between Tibetan and Himalayan peoples for centuries, it was not the only one. At the time of his escape, the young Dalai Lama was far from blazing a trail in seeking refuge in India. Interconnections between aristocratic families in Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet – who had close ties within intergenerational networks of monastic patronage, colonial education, intermarriage, seasonal migration and trade – had been thoroughly documented and closely monitored during the colonial period, especially through the British Political Office in Gangtok.
- 13 India took over the administration of Sikkim in 1888–89 and established the Political Office in 1890. Over the next three decades, India attempted to establish new structures of administration in Sikkim, modelled on those in the provinces, in sectors such as law and justice, health, education, taxation and communication systems (McKay 2021). The political officers in Sikkim were also responsible for Indian relations with Tibet and Bhutan, and were mostly recruited from among the ‘frontier cadre’, an elite corps of a few dozen men who had run British operations in the Himalaya, many of whom were fluent Tibetan speakers (McKay 1997). Traditionally, the political officer in an Indian princely state was supposed to be ‘the Whisper behind the Throne, but never for an instant the Throne itself’ (quoted in Duff 2015: 17). In Sikkim, however, they took a more overt and overbearing interest in the kingdom’s affairs. The political officer’s base, called the Residency, was topographically the highest building on the Gangtok mountainside. It towered over the palace in the pecking order, and quite literally too (Duff 2015: 21).
- 14 The Indian administration was conscious of the potential provided by education and employment to ensure its proximity with the elite in the region. Princes and princesses from Sikkimese and Bhutanese royal families, the Tibetan aristocracy and some of the Dalai Lama’s own siblings often studied in English schools and colleges in the colonial capitals of Simla and Calcutta, as well as cosmopolitan centres like Kalimpong and Darjeeling near Sikkim, and also at universities in England (Harris et al 2016, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2019, Jetsun Pema 1998, Thondup and Thurston 2015). These included the Sikkimese Chogyal (Dharma King) Tashi Namgyal (r 1914–1963) and his children, some of whom subsequently joined the Government of India’s employ, which further strengthened their loyalty. Tashi Namgyal’s eldest son, Paljor, was a pilot officer in the Royal Indian Air Force and served in the Second World War (1940–41). At the time of his death in a flying accident in Peshawar (capital of the North West Frontier Province) in 1941, he had been preparing to transfer to Burma to fight the looming Japanese advance. After his passing, his younger brother Palden Thondup Namgyal became the heir apparent. In addition to an English education, Thondup had spent three years training as a monk at a Tibetan monastery. His mother’s family lived in Lhasa and his first wife Sangay Deki was also from Lhasa. Thondup’s sister Princess Coocoola was married to the Governor of Gyantse (in Central Tibet), who was from the family of

Phunkang Shappe¹⁶ in Lhasa (see Harris and Shakya 2003). Thondup's paternal cousin was Jigmie Dorji, whose family held the hereditary position of prime minister of Bhutan, and the two had trained together at the Indian Civil Service (ICS) academy in Dehradun in 1942.

- 15 The British were acutely aware of the solidity of these interrelations between Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, and understood the importance of these families as supporters of British policies in Sikkim and Bhutan, as links in their relations with Tibet and as a potential counterbalance to the (albeit weak) Kuomintang influence in the region (see Harris et al 2016, Singh 1988). Archival references to their role are often found in unlikely places, for example, in a 1942 file about the wool trade between British India and Tibet from the Sikkim Agency (under the Department of External Affairs) at the National Archives of India. Here, Basil Gould (political officer in Sikkim, 1935–45) recounted the educational, professional and personal details of some of these children to H Weightman, the joint secretary in the External Affairs Department in Delhi. Gould had taken a personal interest in Jigmie's and Thondup's education, and recommended them to the ICS course.¹⁷ He said:

The Sikkim New Year... fitted in with the beginning of the School holidays and we had with us the Sikkim Maharaja's children: Thondup—who had just done his Senior Cambridge Examination...; and Raja Dorji's children: Tashi, who has been working for her Intermediate Science examination —with a view to becoming a doctor— in Calcutta; Jigme¹⁸ who is now Jongpen of Ha in Western Bhutan... and Ugyen and Lhendup (boys), who are at the Convent School in Kalimpong.

It was recently 'discovered' that Ugyen is the spiritual successor of the Incarnate Lama of a monastery at Chaksam, where one crosses the Brahmaputra on the way to Lhasa. There were also five boys of good Lhasa families who are at school at St Joseph's, Darjeeling. The eldest Sikkim girl Coocoo, as you know, recently married the eldest son of Phunkang Shappe in Lhasa.

They are all good specimens, full of intelligence and fun, and of excellent manners... I mention these children because individually and collectively, they, and the few who had already come and the many more who may hereafter come from Tibet to school in India, are likely to have a big influence on our relations with Tibet, and on progress in Sikkim and Bhutan.

The Chinese, with their school in Lhasa, show that they realise the *political importance of education*. The Tibetan children provide *valuable links* with several of the leading officials in Tibet. The youngest of them is the same age as the Dalai Lama.¹⁹

An interconnected Himalayan world: Tendöl's story

- 16 The 'valuable links' Gould alludes to in the above passage proved crucial to Tibetan families when they came into exile. A recently published autobiographical account *A Childhood in Tibet: Tendöl's story* (2021) by Tendöl Namling from the Namseling family captured the warp and weft of social relations in the Himalaya; the family itself serving as a microcosm for Tibetan aristocracy in the twentieth century. Tendöl was the youngest daughter of Paljor Jigme Namseling (ca 1908–1973),²⁰ an aristocrat whose family had been in public service from the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682). Since 1925 her father had held several high-ranking appointments in the Tibetan government; inter alia, as Dzongpön (*rdzong dpon*, governor) of Shigatse and a Tsipön (*rtsi dpon*, chief accountant), who would ride on horseback to work at the Potala. Paljor Jigme mistrusted the '17-Point Agreement'²¹ and was believed to have played a major

part in drafting the petition to the Chinese in 1952, which listed six points for ‘improvement of relations between the Chinese and the Tibetans’. He led a delegation from Lhasa to Lhokha in southern Tibet to negotiate the disarmament of the Chushi Gangdrug (*chu bzhi sqang drug*, four rivers and eight ridges) resistance force in October 1958, but ended up joining them instead. His wife was three-months pregnant with Tendöl at the time he fled from Lhasa to India. In fact, Paljor Jigme and his fellow resistance fighters helped the Dalai Lama arrive safely in India. At the time Tendöl recounted these events for her memoir, she was still wearing the prayer rosary the latter had given her father in recognition of his service to Tibet. In exile, Paljor Jigme worked in Kalimpong and Gangtok as the Dalai Lama’s representative. He spent the final years of his life with his daughter Soyang (Sonam Yangchen) in Sikkim, and died in 1973 (Hodler 2021: 4, 17–20, 67). Soyang was married to Gyalsey Kushon Jigdäl Tsewang Namgyal (1928–2014), affectionately known as Gyalsey Georgela, the youngest son of Sikkimese Chogyal Tashi Namgyal. The connection with the Sikkimese royal house probably resulted in Tendöl’s and Soyang’s mother’s early release from prison in Lhasa; Choekyi was allowed to leave a month earlier than scheduled because Soyang was visiting Lhasa at the time (Hodler 2021: 71). She had been imprisoned for ‘active counter-revolution and sabotage’; her arrest warrant alleged that she had ‘deluded herself into restoring the satanic system of serfdom...[and] repeatedly told her son how beautiful life was in India, Bhutan and in former [Tibetan] society, and taught her son the reactionary ideology of capitalism’ (Hodler 2021: 40–41).

- 17 The Namseling family were wont to making pilgrimages to Buddhist centres in India, such as Bodhgaya, and it was under the ‘ploy of pilgrimage’ that Tendöl’s mother took the three eldest siblings to India, crossing the Nathu La pass to Sikkim on foot in September 1957. The mother and daughters spent an idyllic five months in Kalimpong, where ‘they listened to music, sang and danced’ – the last vestiges of normality before history intervened (Hodler 2021: 7–9). On their way back, they met many Tibetans who were already fleeing to India. Like many Tibetan aristocratic children, the Namseling girls were enrolled at the Catholic convent, St Joseph’s, in Kalimpong. Their brother was an incarnate lama, recognised by the Dalai Lama himself as the sixth Khado Rinpoche. Suddenly, after March 1959, the Namseling sisters stopped receiving remittances from home, and they had to sell their coral and turquoise jewellery to pay their school fees. They did not know that their father had joined the resistance and fled to India (Hodler 2021: 7–9, 20–21, 77). It was a shared experience of rupture familiar to many Tibetans in exile. The Dalai Lama’s younger sister Jetsun Pema recounted a tense period at Loreto Convent in Darjeeling when sporadic updates of political disturbances in Tibet came through a lone radio set up in the common room, and did little to quell the anxiety among pupils enrolled in English schools in India whose families navigated an uncertain future back home. One day, the Mother Superior summoned Jetsun Pema out of the classroom to relay the news: ‘Your family have fled from Tibet. No one knows where they are’. For several weeks she did not receive word of the safe arrival of His Holiness and other exiles (Chawla 2022a, Geleck Palsang 2022).
- 18 Tendöl was made to leave school and work in the road construction camp in Kongpo near the border with India. She was among a group of 400 workers – which mostly comprised young Chinese people who also had to work in road construction to earn the right to attend school or vocational training. It was here that she heard the news of her father’s death – six years after his demise – from a passing group of Tibetan men

travelling from India. She realised much later that the men were part of the first fact-finding delegation sent by the Dalai Lama to Tibet in 1979, led by Kalon Juchen Thubten Namgyal (1929–2011), which also included the Dalai Lama’s brother Lobsang Samden (1933–1985), and his brother-in-law Phuntsok Tashi Takla (1922–1999) (Anon 1985, Anon 2011, Anon nd).

A two-way debt of gratitude

- 19 There were several supporters of Tibet in the highest echelons of administration in India. Among them was N K Rustomji, who had served as Government of India’s advisor to Bhutan and Sikkim. In September 1965, barely three years after the Sino-Indian War and six years after the Dalai Lama had escaped to India, he made an impassioned case for India’s support for the exiled leader in an address to the All India Radio.²² Rustomji pointed out that while Tibet owed a debt of gratitude to India for the teachings of past masters, it was now India that was indebted to Tibetans in exile. Santarakshita (eighth century CE), Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche (eighth century CE), Marpa (eleventh century CE) and Atisha (eleventh century CE) had expounded Buddhist teachings and assisted in translating the Buddhist canon into Tibetan. And Tibetan refugees who followed the Dalai Lama were keeping alive precious manuscripts and shepherding monastic traditions that had long disappeared in India, often at great peril to themselves:

[W]hile leaving behind their personal possessions, [they] have remembered, in the fullness of their faith, to bring with them the precious Tibetan translations of ancient Indian texts on early Buddhism that had long ago disappeared from their homeland when the monasteries in India were pillaged by invaders from the North.

²³

- 20 In the late 1960s through to the 1980s, E Gene Smith, at the Library of Congress Field Office in Delhi, oversaw the reprinting of many of these texts provided by Tibetan exiles, or by Tibetan-speaking communities in the Himalaya. The texts laid the foundation for the Buddhist Digital Resource Centre, formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre (Yachin and Fischman 2022). However, refugees were not the first or the only ones to have brought Buddhist manuscripts to India, nor was it always the sacrificial or heroic feat that Rustomji made it out to be. Decades before Tibetan exile, Indian scholars such as Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917) and Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), as well as imperial spies disguised as Buddhist lamas, had travelled to Tibet and brought back Buddhist texts, paintings and artifacts; Sankrityayan’s extensive collection is housed at the Patna Museum (Das 1893, Stewart 2013).²⁴
- 21 In a similar vein to Rustomji, Sikkimese political officer Apa B Pant’s recollections from a visit to the Norbu Lingka (the Dalai Lama’s summer residence) in September 1957 dismissed contemporary ‘political, ideological, social and economic tensions’ in Tibet – the rebellion against the Chinese in Kham – as ‘temporal and temporary power-conflicts, in favour of Tibet’s “timeless” religious bond with India’. As with Bhutan and Sikkim, Tibet was oriented towards India, as opposed to China, in the understanding of officials like Pant and Rustomji:

I was less concerned with these temporal and temporary power-conflicts than with the desire to reach and find that which Tibet had preserved for centuries. Generation after generation, Tibetans had journeyed on pilgrimage to India, China, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, in search of Buddhist texts and traditions... But

the greatest goal of travel had always been India, where Gautama the Buddha had lived and taught, and the script of their language had been developed for the prime purpose of translating Sanskrit texts... Down to this day, every Tibetan book begins, to show its authenticity, with a sentence taken from Sanskrit: Gyāgār ketu- 'So is said in the language of India' (Pant [1974] 2018: ch6).

- 22 Thus, in characterising Tibetan refugees as worthy of India's gratitude and sympathy, these officials also defined their vision for India: they stressed a connection between Hinduism and Buddhism, and established India as the natural home of Buddhism, from where it originated and to which it should return, and implied that Tibetan exiles assisted in a Buddhist rejuvenation in India (Ober 2019, 2023, Sherman 2022, Surendran 2024).

Conclusion

- 23 Gratitude and reverence towards the Dalai Lama have flowed organically and reciprocally among the Himalayan regions of India, before and since the rupture caused by his exile. Here, both Buddhists and Muslims, equal inhabitants of a syncretic Tibetan world, have embraced mutual gratitude. An illustrative example is the Radhu family of Ladakh that had secured the right to carry the triennial tribute²⁵ and homage from the Ladakhi kings to the Dalai Lama's seat at the Potala Palace in Lhasa.²⁶ The journey of over a thousand miles took two and a half months along the Changthang plateau. In a moving description of the syncretic and symbiotic culture of Ladakh at the time, historian Siddiq Wahid recounted how the last caravan carrying this tribute in 1942 was led by his father Abdul Wahid Radhu (Radhu 2017). While the tribute items required fewer than ten pack animals, the caravans were usually made up of over two hundred and fifty of them. The remaining pack animals were donations by common Ladakhis to contribute to the mission's expenses and carried the private trade goods of the tribute-bearers. Since the caravan was on its way to the auspicious seat of the Dalai Lama, people considered it a privilege and an honour to contribute to the mission's operations, both in kind and labour. The mission was exempt from paying for lodgings in the villages *en route* to Lhasa and back, and the mission flag protected it from being attacked by brigands on the way. Thus, in addition to the honour of being part of the mission, those carrying the tribute did not incur any overhead costs and loaded the extra animals with private goods for trade. The Lhasa branch of the Radhu family largely depended on the tribute-corridor trade with Lhasa. The items for Lhasa included wool, gold dust, turquoise, coral, amber and other semi-precious stones, dried apricots and consumer items. On the way back to Leh, they mainly carried Chinese tea bricks and wool (Radhu 2017: xi-xii).
- 24 Fortunately, syncretism and harmony outlived the tribute mission in this part of the Himalaya. This is evident in a recent documentary *Prayers Answered* (2009) by Tibetan exile filmmaker Geleck Palsang, which chronicled the Dalai Lama's trip to a Muslim village called Turtuk on the invitation of its tribal leaders. The Balti village in the Union Territory of Ladakh, whose people were a composite of tribes from Iran, Tibet, Dard and Mongolia, became part of India after the 1971 War.²⁷ The village leaders spoke of the Dalai Lama as 'rehnuma' (Urdu for leader or guide) and received him with deep reverence and affection (Palsang 2009).²⁸ They described themselves as Muslims of

‘Tibetan racial stock’ and their physiognomy and lifestyle – eating, dressing and the dialect – as similar to that of western Tibet.²⁹

- 25 This story of just one part of the western Himalaya, whose inhabitants revere the Dalai Lama despite not sharing his faith, is either neglected today or presented as an addendum to the history of India proper or mainland China (see Atwill 2014, 2018, Bhutia 2018, Wahid 2017). Thus, an understanding not only of the migration but also the acceptance of Tibetans in the Himalaya provides a richer, fuller account of Indian history. At a time when it is fashionable to talk about globalisation and plural societies, it behoves us to resuscitate these histories of nations with ‘a priori “globalised” social structures that were more than a millennium in the making...’ (Radhu 2017: xxii).
- 26 In the end, as the evidence presented in this article has shown, the Himalaya is not, and never was, an insurmountable ‘natural barrier’ – a sentry as Indian schoolchildren sing in *sare jahaan se achcha* (‘better than the whole world’)³⁰ – that separated India from its neighbours in the north and the east. It is home to interconnected yet internally diverse ecologies, societies and polities that crisscross many contemporary borders and are often ensconced in a Tibetan and Buddhist cultural sensibility (Chawla 2024). We could conclude with a reminder from Wahid: ‘the loss of the memory of *organic relationships between nations* in favour of exclusive *territorial possessiveness between states* may be at the root of the problems that besiege societies’, and the Tibetan and Himalayan world might offer us lessons to overcome these problems (Radhu 2017: xxii, emphasis in the original).

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NOTES

1. Prime minister's note to the foreign secretary on the situation in Asia, 14 December 1948 (quoted in Bhasin 2021: xxvi).
2. Wylie: jo lags, 'older brother'.
3. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Oral History Interview by B R Nanda, 18 December 1975, Transcript, Prime Ministers Museum and Library (formerly, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), New Delhi. Hereafter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975.
4. For how some of these itinerant men served as translators, surveyors and spies, see Stewart (2013).

5. Arthur J Hopkinson, political officer, Sikkim to H E Richardson, Indian Mission, Lhasa; Copy to central intelligence officer, Shillong, Assam; the superintendent of police, Darjeeling; the Tibetan liaison officer, Kalimpong, 8 May 1947. National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), External Affairs, Tibet, 1947, File 7(18) P/47, 'Policy of British India towards Tibet'.
6. See Diehl (2002), Hess (2009), Shakya (1993, 1999). Examples abound in fiction, memoirs and poetry too (Bitter et al 2017, Norbu 2011, Tsundue 2008, Tsering 2003, Tsundue 2014).
7. The governance of Tibet by the Dalai Lamas began with the 'Great' Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (1617–1682). He established a wide infrastructure of taxation and administration, both in secular and religious matters, named himself an emanation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (considered the patron protector of Tibet), constructed the Potala Palace in Lhasa and shifted the Dalai Lama's residence from Ganden Podrang at Drepung Monastery in Lhasa to the newly constructed Potala, which then became the seat of the Tibetan government (Gardner 2009).
8. The Dalai Lama recalled that his very first meeting with Nehru was at the airport in Beijing prior to the interaction at the cocktail party mentioned here (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1975).
9. The title was first bestowed in the 1570s upon the Third Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso, by the leader of the Tumet Mongols, Altan Khan. It was then applied posthumously to his previous incarnations, Gendun Drub and Gendun Gyatso. Khan and Sonam Gyatso established a 'patron-priest' relationship (Wylie: *mchod yon*), modelled on the one between the Sakya leader Pakpa Lodro Gyeltsen and the Mongolian emperor Khubilai Khan in the thirteenth century (Adams 2008).
10. Anachronistic claims about the historical Buddha's 'nationality' have long been a point of contention within religious-nationalist debates in India and Nepal. Both contemporary states claim to be the true inheritors of the Buddha's legacy. Most scholars agree that Siddhartha Gautama, the Shakya prince who became the Buddha, was born in Lumbini in present-day Nepal. The site of the capital of Kapilavastu, where he was raised, has been a matter of some dispute among archaeologists and historians, with some claiming it was at Tilaura Kot in the Kapilavastu district of Nepal, and others that it was at Piprahwa in present-day Uttar Pradesh, India. Siddhartha is believed to have awakened (attained Buddhahood) under a Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, taught his first sermon at Sarnath and passed away at Kushinagar, all of which are in present-day India (Dennis 2017, Sharda 2015).
11. Wylie: *mi mang*, 'common people'.
12. Wylie: *chos rgyal*, 'a king who rules according to dharma' (and literal translation of the Sanskrit 'Dharma Raja').
13. Prime Ministers Museum and Library, Apa B Pant Papers, Subject File No5.
14. While Tibetan culture is often identified with Tibetan Buddhism, not all Tibetans are Buddhist. Many follow the pre-Buddhist Bon religion; some are Muslim (Atwill 2018, Ramble 1993, Radhu 2017). The film from which the third epigraph above is sourced documents the deep affection and regard with which a Tibetan Muslim village in Baltistan welcomes the Dalai Lama in 2005 (Palsang 2009).
15. The 'triangle' refers to Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet (Singh 1988).
16. A lay member of the Tibetan cabinet.

17. NAI, External Affairs, Sikkim Agency, 1942, File 1(1) P/42. 'Further education of Palden Thondup Namgyal, Maharajkumar of Sikkim and Jigmie Dorji of Bhutan in ICS Probationers Training School in Dehra Dun'.
18. The reference is to Jigmie Palden Dorji of the Dorji family of Bhutan.
19. 24 December 1941. NAI, External Affairs, Sikkim Agency, 1942, File 101/X/42. 'Tibetan Wool'. Added emphases.
20. http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/biography_180.html
21. 'The Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet', more commonly known as the 'Seventeen Point Agreement' was signed in Beijing between Tibet and China on 23 May 1951. For China, the Agreement 'represents the legal and historical basis for Chinese rule in Tibet', and Tibetans within the government in Tibet have relied on it to argue that Tibet was unlike other minority groups and regions. Subsequently, the Chinese government held that the abortive revolt of 1959 had made the Agreement invalid, while Tibetan exile organisations and the Dalai Lama – who publicly repudiated the Agreement in a statement to the press on 20 June 1959 – argued that it was invalid because it had been signed under duress (Shakya 2013:609–10). See also Goldstein (1991)
22. Prime Ministers Museum and Library, formerly the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), N K Rustomji Papers, Subject File No 32. Rustomji was speaking within the pressing context of 'the Chinese ultimatum' to withdraw from alleged incursions into Tibet, which had been given to India during the India-Pakistan War.
23. *Ibid.* See also Chawla (2024).
24. I am indebted to Alison Melnick Dyer and Ruth Gamble for alerting me to these early preservation efforts.
25. Wylie: *lo phyag*.
26. The tribute-cum-trade mission was decreed by the Treaty of Tingmosgang (1684), which had been signed following a five-year war between the Ladakhi monarchy (Buddhist) and the Mughal Kashmir (Muslim) alliance on one side and the Tibetan (Buddhist) clergy and Mongol (shamanist) tribes alliance on the other (Radhu 2017: xi).
27. For about twelve centuries before the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh combined Gilgit, Baltistan, Ladakh and Kashmir to create the Jammu and Kashmir State (1834–1846), Ladakh and Baltistan had been Tibet's westernmost ethnic, linguistic and cultural extensions; Kashmir lay at the centre of the links between Central Eurasia and South Asia (Radhu 2017: xi–xxii).
28. See the third epigraph above. Following the Dalai Lama's visit to Turtuk and with his personal encouragement, a group of village students were enrolled in the neighbouring Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) school. The children are culturally Tibetan and Muslim, and the school provides resources for both parts of their identity to flourish. The TCV (formerly, the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children) was founded in 1960 to care for orphaned Tibetan children and those who had been separated from their families. It now comprises a network of eight residential schools and four day-schools across India, as well as youth hostels, colleges and vocational centres. It caters to 16,726 children, a large number of whom come from the Himalayan states in India and neighbouring countries, and some have advocated the model of schooling for the Himalaya at large (Chawla 2022a, 2023c; Wahid 2014).

29. On the rich and composite history of Tibetan Muslims, see Atwill (2014, 2018).

30. Mohammad Iqbal's rousing song 'Sare Jahan se Achcha' ('better than the whole world'). Originally titled 'Tarana-e-Hindi' or 'Anthem of Hind (India)', it was written as a nationalistic song for children in 1904 and is performed to this day during morning assemblies in Indian schools. The song depicts the Himalaya as a sentry and watchman protecting India.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines interconnections between parts of the Indian Himalaya and Tibet in the period encompassing the escape of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to India in 1959. While Buddhism served as connecting tissue binding together communities across recently drawn national borders, networks linking families in Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet were also forged through monastic patronage, colonial education, intermarriage, seasonal migration and trade. Through a reading of colonial and postcolonial archives from Delhi, London and Gangtok, as well as the private papers of Indian political appointees in the Himalaya, the article shows how, far from blazing a trail, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans who followed him into exile were treading well-worn migration routes and leaning on relationships forged over centuries. Archival evidence from press and parliamentary proceedings in the 1950s and 1960s reveals a shared religious history and information that India claimed to be the cradle of the subcontinent's Buddhist heritage, which helped garner greater support for the Dalai Lama and his countrymen.

Cet article examine les interconnexions entre certaines parties de l'Himalaya indien et le Tibet au cours de la période qui a suivi la fuite du quatorzième Dalaï Lama en Inde en 1959. Si le bouddhisme a servi de lien entre les communautés au-delà des frontières nationales récemment tracées, les réseaux reliant les familles du Sikkim, du Bhoutan et du Tibet ont également été forgés par le mécénat monastique, le système éducatif colonial, les mariages mixtes, les migrations saisonnières et le commerce. À travers une lecture des archives coloniales et postcoloniales étudiées à Delhi, Londres et Gangtok, ainsi que des documents privés de responsables politiques indiens dans l'Himalaya, l'article montre que, loin d'ouvrir une nouvelle voie, le Dalaï Lama et les Tibétains qui l'ont suivi en exil empruntaient des itinéraires de migration bien connus et s'appuyaient sur des relations forgées au fil des siècles. Les archives de la presse et des débats parlementaires des années 1950 et 1960 révèlent une histoire religieuse commune et montrent comment l'Inde se voit comme le berceau de l'héritage bouddhiste du sous-continent, ce qui a contribué à renforcer le soutien au Dalaï Lama et à ses compatriotes.

INDEX

Keywords: Tibet-India relations, Dalai Lama, Himalaya, migration, Tibetan Buddhism

Mots-clés: relations Tibet-Inde, Dalaï Lama, Himalaya, migration, bouddhisme tibétain

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