

Writing more of India into Tibetology

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Let's situate the study of Tibet outside the narrow silo of Sino-Indian relations and within the Himalaya. It might teach us much that we don't know about India.

As students of Tibet and the Himalaya, we welcome the Indian Army's recent proposal for its officers to study Tibetology. A media report on January 28 said that officers would study "Tibetan history, culture, and language on both sides of the Line of Actual Control" in order to "counter Chinese influence and propaganda".

The Indian Army is right to emphasise the importance of building expertise on Tibet to understand the history and contemporary challenges in India's relationship with China. Indeed, India-China relations cannot be approached through a strictly bilateral prism that excludes Tibet and the Himalaya.

Equally, Tibetology cannot be confined within the bounds of state interests and territorial conflicts on either side of the Tibetan plateau. It encompasses the multi- and interdisciplinary study of the broader Tibetan cultural region, and is most productively situated with and within the Himalaya.

According to the *Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies* (2003), the region includes not just U-Tsang (present-day Tibet Autonomous Region), Amdo, and Kham, but large areas in the Himalaya, including parts of Nepal and Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, and Tawang. We believe that approaching the region through these trans-Himalayan connections, as opposed to nation-state silos, can teach us not just about Sino-Indian relations but also about large parts of India.

Colonial provenance

As with other parts of the colonised world, the production and codification of knowledge about Tibet served European imperial interests. Britain recognised the importance of Sikkim and Bhutan in securing its interests in Tibet, and its Political Officer in Sikkim cultivated close relations with aristocratic families in the region. Simultaneously, from Warren Hastings in the 1770s to Francis Younghusband in 1903-04, an army of cartographers, mountaineers, missionaries, linguists, and botanists worked to produce definitive knowledge about Tibet for British India.

On the one hand, works of fiction such as James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933) painted a mythical image of Tibet as Shangri-la — a utopian society untouched by modernity; the repository of a putative true Buddhism. On the other, imperial realpolitik wrestled with demarcating the territorial boundaries of British India and its protectorates, most notably through the McMahon Line (1914). These approaches shaped initial academic engagements with Tibet — trends which persist to this day.

Free India, Tibetan studies

Independent India recognised the economic and cultural ties that traversed the Himalayas and the role of Buddhism as the connecting tissue. This informed the institution-building efforts of the government in the 1950s. Dedicated to Tibetan and Buddhist studies, the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies and the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies were established in Leh and Sarnath, Varanasi, respectively, as was the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in the erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim, which was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1958. The Institutes in Sarnath and Gangtok are on the Indian Army's list of places where officers can study Tibetology.

These efforts notwithstanding, studies on Tibet by Indian academics have largely mirrored India's geopolitical anxieties, which were exacerbated after the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Some exceptions such as Girija Saklani and T.C. Palakshappa aside, the majority of Indian scholarship on Tibet has continued to focus on the role of Tibet in the bilateral relationship between India and China, or on Buddhism.

By understanding Tibet as a buffer zone in India-China relations, the former often leads to an ahistorical narrative of India and Tibet as “natural allies”, eschewing the history of complex political engagements between successive administrations in Lhasa and India over issues ranging from frontiers to customary rights of grazing and trade. It does not account for the centrality of Tibet in India's relationship with Bhutan and Sikkim (before 1975).

Similarly, with respect to Buddhism, the *guru-chela* narrative of India as the birthplace of Buddhism and Tibet as the recipient of this knowledge dominates, as does the idea of Buddhism as a derivative of Hinduism. This often excludes a view of Tibetan Buddhism as

a living and evolving entity that thrives in large parts of the Himalayan region. It also ends up equating Tibet with a reified Tibetan Buddhism devoid of sectarian complexity, and erasing Tibet's non-Buddhist religions.

A Himalayan home

Most tragically, in defining Tibetology so narrowly, we miss an opportunity to understand contemporary India. The postcolonial Indian state was not forged in the centres of Delhi and Calcutta alone. Nor were its mountains and plains integrated into a single nation-state uniformly. The Himalaya is not just an insurmountable “natural barrier” — a sentry as we sing in *sare jahaan se achcha* — that separates India from its neighbours. It is home to interconnected yet diverse ecologies, societies, and politics that criss-cross many contemporary borders.

What is more, there is no location more advantageous for studying Tibet and the Himalaya. Indian institutions — both national and state archives, as well as private collections in libraries — house the richest materials for this work. India hosts the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the Central Tibetan Administration, Tibetan refugee settlements and a plethora of Tibetan institutes. Linguistic and field expertise abound, as do opportunities for learning the language for the uninitiated.

Foregrounding the interconnections among Tibet and the Himalayan regions and their relationship with the Indian centre offers valuable perspectives into processes of state-making and the politics of nation-building. As recent environmental, social, and geopolitical crises show, these continue to remain live concerns.

Thus, in broadening the mandate for Tibetology, we write more of India into the story. It is no longer only about countering the other beyond the mountain.

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