

## **India Tibet relations 1947-1949**

### **India begins to vacillate**

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#### **Introduction**

For centuries, India and Tibet have shared a common border, the mighty Himalayas and a common spiritual search. During the seventh century AD, the light came from India: the Roof of the World discovered Buddha's teachings. It was an important turning point in the history of Tibet.

The following period saw a constant flow of Tibetan lamas, pandits and yogis visiting the great Indian viharas. It is fascinating to note the changes wrought by the Buddhist faith on the people of Tibet who were among the most belligerent on earth. After adopting the new religion, their powerful Empire which had spread far and wide, suddenly turned pacifist. As a result it would never recover its past military glory but it would start another kind of conquest, the conquest of self, and begin to spread its cultural influence over Central Asia and Mongolia.

The disappearance of Buddhism from India around the XIIth-XIIIth century had very grave consequences for the subcontinent and Central Asian politics. The Buddha dharma continued to flourish on the Roof of the World, but the interest of Lamas in what they still considered as Aryabhumi rapidly declined.

Another era began with the British took control of the Peninsula. The relation with Tibet which had always been spiritual, became strategic and economic, with the colonial rulers.

The Crown's officials saw the Land of Snows as an opportunity to open new markets and create a convenient buffer zone between India and the Russian Empire. China was too weak to react meaningfully but continued to pretend to be the suzerain of Tibet.

In July 1904, a young British Colonel, Francis Younghusband entered the holy city of Lhasa and forced upon the Tibetans their first Agreement with the mighty British Empire. In signing this treaty with the Crown Representative, Tibet was 'acknowledged' by London as a separate nation. In March 1914, wanting to show fairness towards China, London called for a tripartite Conference in Simla to settle the issue: the three main protagonists sat together at a negotiation table for the first time. The result was not entirely satisfactory as the Chinese only initialized the main document and did not ratify it. The British and Tibetans however agreed on a common border which they demarcated on a map: the famous McMahon Line was born. This treaty was still in force when India became independent in August 1947.

In October 1950, an event changed the destiny of the Himalayan region as well as the relations between India and China: Mao's troops marched into Eastern Tibet.

While keeping in mind the above historical background, this paper will concentrate on the period 1947-1951.

### **Life in Tibet in the 1940's**

At the end of the 1940's, obvious of whirlwind changes everywhere else on the planet, life in Lhasa went on as usual. While Asian or African people talked about Revolution, Independence or the end of Imperialism, these notions meant nothing in Tibet.

These concepts could only be grasped by the few who had gone to Darjeeling or Kalimpong to study English,<sup>1</sup> or to Chungking or Nanking to learn Chinese<sup>2</sup>. There were very few.

For most Tibetans and especially for the monks in the monasteries around Lhasa, 'independence' only meant that they could continue to practice their religion as they had done for centuries. Many probably felt closer to China, which had been a Buddhist nation before the fall of the Manchu dynasty. They knew about the priest-patron which for generations regulated the rapport between the Head Lamas of Tibet and the Emperors

of China; that way the autonomy of Tibet had thus been protected for centuries.

Only a handful of senior officials who had engaged in negotiations with the British in the early part of the twentieth century (especially during the Simla Conference) knew the importance of the word 'independence'.

The Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who was a great visionary leader, had seen that it was necessary for the Tibetans to open to the outside world and this is why he had sent a few young children to be educated in England. In 1920, he even tried to approach the League of Nations<sup>3</sup> to see if Tibet could become a member state; it would possibly have given an international recognition to the de facto independence which Tibet then enjoyed.

### **India becomes Independent**

In June 1947, the haste with which the British Government decided to divest themselves of their responsibilities in India, caused the Tibetans to wonder whether they were about to be deprived of the diplomatic support they had enjoyed so far. Richardson, the last head of the Mission British in Lhasa commented: "It was left to the British Mission in Lhasa, with little official guidance, to reassure the Tibetans as far as possible."<sup>4</sup>

Viceroy Mountbatten was a man in a hurry and his energies were fully concentrated on how to get rid, as fast as possible, of the 'jewel' of the British Empire, regardless of the loss in human life and the harm to the Indian subcontinent. The Land of Snows was not on his agenda.

At the time of India's independence, Tibet was considered a de facto independent State by the British government. The new Indian Government followed, for some time, the same policy. The only restriction was a token suzerainty by the Chinese, conditioned by their acceptance of the complete autonomy of Tibet.

The first communication of the Government of Independent India to the Foreign Office of the Tibetan Government was to request the latter to ratify the Simla Convention. This formal request from the Government of

India to the Foreign Office of Tibet was itself the best proof of Tibet's independent status in 1947.

Thus reads the India Note: "The Government of India would be glad to have an assurance that it is the intention of the Government of Tibet to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached on matters that either party may wish to take up. This is the procedure adopted by all other countries with which India has inherited treaty relations from His Majesty's Government".<sup>5</sup>

Richardson wrote that the Tibetan Government acknowledged the message but did immediately reply.<sup>6</sup>

When during an interview with the Dalai Lama we asked him if the Kashag<sup>7</sup> had not committed a great mistake by refusing to ratify the Simla Convention and bargaining instead for the return of some 'lost territories' to Tibet, he replied: "Yes, it is my strong feeling. At that time the Tibetan Government should have send a strong delegation to celebrate the Independence of India. Of course that was a big mistake.

"About Kalimpong, Darjeeling, I do not know. But about Mon [Tawang] in NEFA area, I remember [an incident which occurred] around 1948/49. At that time I had no responsibility. I heard and noticed that a special Tibetan National Assembly took place and a British mission came to see the Kashag in the Potala. I remember some of the people of the British Mission who came (I think Richardson was one of them). Along with them, there were some people dressed in Sikkimese dress. From my window in Potala, I noticed [the commotion]. I was told that the Tibetan National Assembly was taking place; the session was going on because some troops of the Indian Army had entered Tawang area. The Tibetan government wanted to [lodge] a protest. It was an indication that at that time because Tawang and these areas were in possession of the Tibetans, they wanted to hold on to these areas, although in 1914 at the Simla Convention the border was already demarcated and the [Convention] was signed. But perhaps most of the Tibetans did not know about Simla (*the Dalai Lama is laughing*). On the spot when some Indian officials came [in Tawang], the Tibetan officials said: 'This is our land' (*laughing*)."

“They did not know that the Government had already decided in 1914. Finally I do not know what they [the National Assembly] decided. Such a wonderful Government! (*laughing*)”.<sup>8</sup>

Had the Tibetan Government ratified the Simla Convention on August 15, 1947, India and Tibet would have been bound by a formal Treaty.

It is difficult to say today whether it would have made a difference, but it is certain that the only wise course for the Tibetan Government would have been to immediately reply<sup>9</sup> through the Indian Representative in Lhasa asserting its faith in the Simla Convention and other treaties, accepting the Indian Government as the successor to the British and eventually requesting Delhi to begin talks about their ‘lost’ territories. India would automatically have assumed the legal rights and obligations of the British. But would Nehru have been willing to assume the ‘imperial’ mantle of the British? It is another question.

### **15 August 1947**

On August 15, the British Mission at Dekyi Lingka, located in one of the Kundeling estates in Lhasa, officially became the Indian Mission. Hugh Richardson, a faithful friend of the Tibetans, was nominated the first Indian Head of Mission.

Nehru later said: “...in the early days after independence and partition, our hands were full and we had to face very difficult situations in our country. We ignored Tibet. Not being able to find a suitable person to act as our representative in Lhasa, we allowed for some time the existing British representative in Lhasa.”<sup>10</sup>

The fact that India accepted for three years to be represented by an Englishman in Lhasa shows an interesting side of the Indian character which is totally opposite to that of the Chinese. Whatever might have been the political and practical compulsions for India, to accept yesterday’s enemy as today’s representative demonstrated a level of tolerance which is unthinkable in China.

In Lhasa, “the transition was almost imperceptible. The existing staff was retained in its entirety and the only obvious change was the change of

flag. After about a year the British Civil Surgeon was replaced by an Indian doctor; and an Indian officer joined the British officer in charge of the Mission for training," wrote Richardson.<sup>11</sup>

In Tibet the change might have been minimal, but the Tibetans discovered soon enough that tremendous changes were shaking Asia, and the ancient Tibet of brocades and picnics was about to disappear.

### **Tibet Arms Itself**

Tibet started to feel these changes and many in Lhasa believed it was time for Tibet to empower itself against its eastern neighbour.

When the British Mission changed over to the Indian Mission, the Kashag requested military help from India. Some weapons were eventually supplied, comprising 144 Bren guns with 360,000 rounds of ammunition, 168 Sten guns with more than 200,000 rounds of ammunitions, 1,206 .303 rifles with 250,000 of rounds of ammunition and 42 Varey pistols with 630 rounds.

The Government of India however refused to sell the mortars and anti-aircraft guns which Lhasa had requested.

The following year, Tibet's Army Chief met the Indian Representative in the Tibetan capital and requested the Indian Government for a continuous supply of arms and ammunition. The supplies were to be on a payment basis and the Tibetans had agreed to pay Rs. 100,000 as an installment on the first consignment.

Another example of the change of attitude of Lhasa: the permission was given by the National Assembly to open the border between India and Tibet to motor traffic. They even went a step further; they accepted the idea of an air link between Lhasa and India. A British company, the General Electric Co. was given a contract to build a small hydropower station to supply electricity to Lhasa. The Company was the first to be permitted to land in Lhasa. The permission was given under the Regent's seal.

It should be noted that to open Tibet to air traffic was an important strategic decision. Due to the high altitude of Lhasa and the rarefied

atmosphere, the flying and more importantly the landing of planes posed problems which required much experience on the Air Force's side. The fact that the landing strip needed to be much longer in higher altitudes and the airplane engine more powerful, was an interesting challenge for the Indian Government. The permission given to General Electric also had important strategic consequences in the event of a military intervention in the Himalayan region, though, at that point in time, defending Tibet was for India mainly a political decision. But in 1949, Tibet was still recognized as a independent nation. If it were not so, would the Government of India have continued to supply arms and ammunition directly to the Tibetan Government without informing the Chinese? In fact, all the dealings between the Indian officials and the Kashag were kept secret from the Chinese. For the Tibetan Government, during those critical times, building an army was only one aspect of the preparations.

### **The Trade Mission**

In October of 1947, only three months after India had become independent, the Kashag decided to send a delegation to India, the United Kingdom, the US and China. The young Tsepon Shakabpa headed the delegation which was comprised of three other members. One of them, Yarphel Pandatsang belonged to one the richest trading families of Kham. Shakabpa cites three reasons for the Mission:

- 1- Tibet's non-Asian exports, chiefly wool, followed by musk, fur and yak-tails, were usually sold through India. All trade business was negotiated through India, which paid Tibet in rupees. The object of the Trade Delegation was to seek the relaxation of the Indian control on Tibetan exports and to request payment in dollars or pound sterling instead of rupees.
- 2- The Delegation was to purchase gold bullion to back the Tibetan currency.
- 3- As the world was not properly informed about Tibet's political status, (the knowledge about the Roof of the World was chiefly from Chinese

sources, it was necessary for Tibet to open formal relations with other nations of the world. To demonstrate Tibet's independent and sovereign status, Tibetan passports were issued to the members of the delegation for travel abroad.<sup>12</sup>

The Tibetan delegation travelled with a passport printed on beautiful handmade paper. In political terms it was perhaps the most significant outcome achieved by the delegation.

Although last on the list, it is clear that the third point was the most important and pressing one for the Kashag.

When the delegation arrived in Delhi, they called on the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten and the Indian Prime Minister. They then began the commercial negotiations and for the purpose met with K.P.S. Menon, the first Indian Foreign Secretary and Harishwar Dayal, an officer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was soon to be posted in Gangtok as the Political Officer, in charge for Tibetans affairs.

The Tibetans immediately asked for 2,000,000 dollars from the Government of India. Their point was that Tibet was a land-locked country and that her only access to the outside foreign trade was through India. They had to use the port of Calcutta exclusively. When Tibet exported goods, the payment was sent to Lhasa in Indian rupees since India refused to consider that the goods were only in transit; but when Tibet had to import other items from other countries, it had to pay in US dollars.

While in Delhi, the Tibetans met Mahatma Gandhi at Birla House. They offered him a ceremonial scarf, a *Katag*.<sup>13</sup> When Gandhi discovered that the material for the scarf was imported, he expressed shock that such a symbolic object for the Tibetans was in fact not locally manufactured. Shakabpa could not explain this point to the Mahatma, but recalled later that they were "deeply moved by the straightforward advice of the Mahatma."

One interesting historical point to note is that no breakthrough could be achieved in the negotiations because Jawaharlal Nehru was quite upset that the Tibetan Government had refused to accept the Government of

India as the successor of the British government. The letter from the Government of India mentioned earlier had not been answered for months by the Kashag who wanted the Indian Government to first return all of Tibet's 'lost territories'.

When the Shakabpa's Trade Mission came first to Delhi in January 1948, the Government of India and the Prime Minister gave them to understand that the immediate need was for "Tibetan and Indian relations to be put on some official basis."<sup>14</sup> The Indian government refused to talk about trade matters unless the Tibetans recognized that the Indian government was "the legal inheritor of the treaties, rights and obligations of British India."

As the Trade Mission did not have the mandate to discuss political matters with Delhi, they decided to inform Lhasa about the stalemate. Since no decision was forthcoming from Lhasa, Shakabpa and his colleagues had no alternative but to continue on their journey to China. Shakabpa does not mention this problem in his *Political History*.

B.N. Mallick, the Director of the Indian Intelligence Bureau, summed up Nehru's feelings when he wrote, 'this ill-advised claim [to lost Tibetan territories], made by the Tibetan Government, resulted in the temporary loss of a certain amount of Indian sympathy for Tibet.'<sup>15</sup>

It would take another six months<sup>16</sup> for Lhasa to announce that Tibet had accepted India as the successor of British India. In a meantime a lot of harm had been done.

Richardson, who was still the head of the Indian Mission in Lhasa, wrote about the Indian rights inherited from the Simla Convention: "...it appeared at that time [in 1947] that the rights were of value to the Indian Government to the same extent as they had been to its predecessor and that the Indian Government was anxious to secure Tibetan consent to the transfer of the whole of the British heritage."<sup>17</sup>

A few years later, Nehru would refuse the same rights and term them as 'imperialist' rights inherited from a colonial empire.

But in 1947-48 Lhasa was living in another world.

The Delegation ultimately remained in India for a couple of months before proceeding to their next stop: Nanjing.

### **The Return to India**

The Trade Mission returned to India in January 1949 after some successes during its trip to the US and the UK where they met the American Secretary of State and the British Prime Minister, but they also discovered the limits of their 'independence.' It was clear that the British government preferred to remain vague about the status of Tibet, in order not to antagonize the Chinese. Great Britain no longer had a common border with Tibet, but since her Hong Kong colony, still had one border with China, they were not keen to antagonize Beijing.

When Shakabpa reached Delhi, many things had changed in India. Though by now the Tibetan Government had accepted that the Government of India was the successor to the British India administration, Nehru was beginning to look with admiration at the new regime in China which was in the process of being taken over from the Nationalists. While Nehru advocated the right of self-determination of the people of Indonesia and Africa, his position vis-à-vis China (and especially Tibet) started vacillating.

The problem of Kashmir had still not been resolved and Nehru had realized that the United Nations Organization had its own limitations, being unable to solve an international conflict in a fair way. The UN Commission's truce proposals had not helped in Kashmir.

Economically, the situation was not very easy for India with the migration of people from East to West Bengal, mounting labour unrest and uncontrolled inflation. It was against this background that Shakabpa returned to Delhi for talks with the Indian Prime Minister.<sup>18</sup>

Again he requested "the grant of two million dollars to Tibet for the purchase of gold" to back up the Tibetan currency. According to the minutes of that meeting, Nehru "pointed out that India was herself suffering from a severe shortage of dollars" but he promised that "the Government of India would do their best to meet essential Tibetan

requirements." When Shakabpa explained that gold was essential for lowering the prices of commodities in Tibet, an unconvinced Prime Minister replied that "rise in prices was due rather to shortage of goods than to inadequate gold backing for currency".

The next question raised by Shakabpa was about free transit facilities through India for Tibetan exports and imports. The Prime Minister remained vague, he said that the matter had been "referred to the Ministries of Finance and Commerce for detailed consideration and that the considered views of the Government of India were expected to be communicated to the Trade Mission." Shakabpa was assured that the question "would receive very careful consideration from his Government." When Shakabpa explained that "Tibetans were a poor people and that the Tibetan Government was very anxious to improve their economic condition," Nehru made two broad suggestions.

The minutes say: "He told the Mission that, in view of lack of technical personnel and capital and of modern means of transport and communication in Tibet, it was difficult for large-scale industries to be established. It was, therefore, advisable for a country like Tibet to plan her economic development in accordance with the suggestions made by Mahatma Gandhi for India. Tibet should undertake the establishment of cottage and small-scale industries. The Prime Minister proposed to send some experts from the All-India Village Industries for three months in the summer to advise the Tibetan Government."

Nehru also "suggested a careful survey of the mineral resources of Tibet. He said that even though it was difficult for India to spare trained geologists he would try to make the services of two or three such people available to the Tibetan Government for a few months in order to undertake a preliminary survey of the mineral resources of Tibet."

These experts would report directly to the Tibetan Government.

The minutes concluded thus: "The Prime Minister assured the Trade Mission that his Government entertained the most cordial feelings of friendship for Tibet, her Government and people and that it would be his

constant endeavour to foster the relations of friendship existing between the two peoples.”

This appears to demonstrate that in the first months of 1949, Nehru still believed that Tibet was a separate entity with a separate government and that the Indian and Tibetan people had relations, different from the Sino-Indian relations.

One of the worries of the Indian government was that if gold was purchased by the Tibetan Government, it could be smuggled back into India. Finally, in March 1949 India agreed to release \$ 250,000 in currency for the purchase of machinery and other essential items, but not gold. But the stubborn Shakabpa refused the deal. His patience paid off two months later, when the Government of India modified its previous order and agreed to the purchase of gold by the Tibetan government. Accordingly, gold was purchased in the US, dispatched to Calcutta and then sent on mules to Tibet.

### **Expulsion of the Chinese from Tibet**

On July 8, 1949, Chen, the acting head of the Chinese mission in Lhasa, was called by the Kashag and informed that he and his staff as well as all Chinese working in schools and hospitals had to leave Tibet. The Chinese were swiftly expelled by the Tibetan Government. In India, their bank accounts were frozen on the request of the Tibetan Government. The Indian Mission was later informed about the *fait accompli*. “It was a complete surprise for the Indian Mission” Richardson commented later. However the Chinese were politely expelled with a band accompanying them out of Lhasa.

The cable that Nehru sent to the Political Officer in Sikkim demonstrates the position of the Government of India vis-à-vis Tibet in 1949, it makes interesting reading: “2. We are concerned over the Tibetan Government's decision to turn out all Chinese officials in Lhasa.<sup>19</sup> These officials were appointed by the National Government of China. Their wholesale expulsion will naturally be regarded as an anti-Chinese rather than anti-Communist move. And the Government of India, by letting them into India without

any travel papers in contravention of all passport regulations, will be regarded as privy to this move.

"3. We can however understand the desire of the Tibetan Government to get rid of persons suspected of subversive tendencies and officials sympathizing with them. From the Tibetan Government's own point of view it would seem better for Tibetans to expel these suspects rather than all Chinese officials in Lhasa."<sup>20</sup>

Nehru was ready to help to a certain extent when he informed the Political Officer in Sikkim that "there are many difficulties in the way of the Government of India receiving and looking after these suspects.

Nevertheless, in view of our friendly relations with the Tibetan Government, we are considering the possibility of giving them passage. We would be gravely embarrassed if they stayed in India. We shall require advance information of the names and particulars of the persons concerned, some indication of the charges against them, and the place or places to which they will proceed."

He concluded by suggesting: "... that unless you or Richardson have any further comments the position of the Government of India should be tactfully explained to the Tibetan Government. The Tibetan Government are the best judges of their own interests but to us it would seem unwise on their part to take any steps which in effect mean the forced discontinuance of the Chinese Mission in Lhasa. The objects of the Tibetan Government will be served by expelling the suspects and officials associated with them. If any of the Chinese, left behind, indulge in objectionable activities they can also be similarly dealt with. Such gradual and considered action will appear justified in the eyes of the world, but not the precipitate action now contemplated."

It is clear that until a few months before 1950, the Government of India, "in view of [its] friendly relations with the Tibetan Government", was ready to help Lhasa with its security concerns. Not only did Delhi treat Tibet as an independent entity, but the Government of India accepted that its government was the best judge of their own problems.

In one of his letters to the Premiers<sup>21</sup> of the Indian provinces, Nehru wrote: "In any event, what is likely to happen is a consolidation of the Communist regime in about two-thirds of China and the advance of the Communist forces towards the South. Within a few months they should occupy the whole of China. It is possible that a splinter government might be formed in Canton, to oppose the Communists. But this is hardly likely to achieve anything. We may take it therefore that the whole of China will be under the control of the Chinese Communists within a few months."<sup>22</sup>

On another occasion, he told the Foreign Secretary:<sup>23</sup> "In view of developments in China, we should keep in close touch with their reactions in Tibet, and we shall think of the policy we should pursue there in case anything happens. The first thing to do is to get fairly full reports from Kashgar as to what is happening there."<sup>24</sup>

A few days later, however he clarified the Government of India's stand on China. In reply to a telegram from Panikkar, he made it clear that India would not ally with the US.

On the excuse of being 'non-aligned' or 'neutral', Nehru often refused to 'work' with Western governments. The practical result, at least for the Tibetan issue, was that this neutrality became an alignment with the Chinese position.

Another interesting point to note is that India had accepted Tibet as one of her friendly neighbours in 1949. It is apparent from the following quotations. On March 1949, in a speech on Indian foreign policy, the Indian Prime Minister declared: "The nearby countries always have a special interest in one another and India must, inevitably, think in terms of its relations with the countries bordering her by land and sea. What are these countries? If you start from the left, Pakistan; I would also include Afghanistan, although it does not touch India's borders; Tibet, China, Nepal, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and Ceylon."<sup>25</sup>

Later he added: "our relations with them [our neighbours] are quite friendly. Take for instance, Afghanistan is exceedingly friendly and our relations with Tibet, Nepal and all these countries roundabout are also very friendly. In fact, I think I am justified in saying that there is no

country in this wide world today with which our relations may be said to be inimical or hostile.”

It is clear from the above statements of the Indian Prime Minister that Tibet was a separate entity from China.

In 1949 Nehru was not overly worried about the situation developing in China. In a letter to John Matthai dated September 10, he wrote: “Recent developments in China and Tibet indicate that Chinese Communists are likely to invade Tibet sometime or other. This will not be very soon. But it may well take place within a year. The Government structure of Tibet is feeble. A Lama hierarchy controls the whole country, the majority of whose population is very poor. Any effective attempt by the Chinese Communists can hardly be resisted, more especially as the greater part of the population is likely to remain passive and some may even help the Communists. On the other side at Sinkiang, Soviet influence is already strong. The result of all this is that we may have the Chinese or Tibetan Communists right up on our Assam, Bhutan and Sikkim border. That fact by itself does not frighten me.”<sup>26</sup>

Three important points have to be noted here; they would remain the corner-stone of the Indian Government’s policy on Tibet. Firstly, Nehru had accepted that Tibet would be invaded; secondly, for Nehru and his advisors Tibet was a rather primitive country and social reforms were long overdue.<sup>27</sup> We shall see that Nehru was not completely adverse to a small dose of socialism to wake up the ‘lama hierarchy’ to the social realities of the twentieth century.

The third point is that Nehru ‘was not frightened’ at the idea of having a new neighbour on his northern border. It would be a major point of difference with Sardar Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister.

If Nehru was in favour of better roads in the border areas, it had nothing to do with strategic considerations. Nehru’s policy of slow and gentle penetration of the frontier regions was implemented during the following years; not taking into consideration the strategic importance of these areas, with the result that when the Chinese attacked India in October 1962, the country was far from ready to protect her borders.

## **Tibet Isolated**

When Panikkar returned from Nanking where he was Indian ambassador, he informed his government that Tibet "was wide open from [the] east and any efforts [to] help Tibet would merely involve India in conflict with Chinese Communists."

Several times, the British High Commission reminded Delhi that India was "the heir of British policy of preserving integrity of Tibet." The British even proposed to "furnish GOI arms and equipment for [the] latter to give to Tibet." The British Government was ready to give a "guarantee of support in case of complications with Chinese Communists."<sup>28</sup>

But the Government of India's position was too vague to be of any help for the Tibetans. When on November 16, 1949 the Indian Prime Minister was asked in a press conference about the position of Tibet in relation to India, he declared: "About the position of Tibet, I may say that for the last 40 years or so, that is to say, during the regime of the British in India, a certain autonomy of Tibet was recognised by the then Government of India and there were direct relations between Tibet and India."

"As regards China's position in Tibet, a vague kind of suzerainty was recognised. All these things were never clearly defined as to what the position was, matters remained vague and they have remained vague in that way. We have a representative in Lhasa. We trade with them directly but in a vague sense we have accepted the fact of China's suzerainty. How far it goes, one does not know."<sup>29</sup>

The word 'vague' was used five times in a few sentences. How to better define the position of Nehru's Government vis-à-vis Tibet at the end of 1949?<sup>30</sup>

Later, in a discussion with an American Embassy official, Bajpai said that Nehru's remarks "were purposely vague, as final policy had not as yet been evolved." However he added that "if the Communist Government of China endeavoured to take over Tibet, [the] situation would be very difficult. The Government of India wanted as much as possible to keep the status quo: they "recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet but that at the

same time Tibet had always exercised a certain independence in its dealings,"<sup>31</sup> with the Indian Government.

Unfortunately this 'vagueness' prevailed right upto the fatal day in 1962. However, it was not the opinion of everyone in the Government. Sardar Patel was not in favour of vagueness, and in June 1949, he wrote to Nehru: "We have to strengthen our position in Sikkim as well as in Tibet. The farther we keep away the Communist forces, the better. Tibet has long been detached from China. I anticipate that as soon as the Communists have established themselves in the rest of China, they will try to destroy its autonomous existence. You have to consider carefully your policy towards Tibet in such a circumstance and prepare from now for that eventuality."

One point was clear: the Government of India was not ready to get involved in a full-fledged military operation in Tibet.

However, in the summer of 1949, the Chief of Army Staff sent a young intelligence officer to survey the eventual routes that could be used to bring troops and ammunition in the event of a 'political' decision to defend Tibet.

The fact that this covert mission took place and this with the knowledge of K.P.S. Menon, the Foreign Secretary, is proof that in the summer of 1949, the Government of India was still keeping all its options open. In the words of this officer who later became one of the most decorated Generals of the Indian army: "My mission was very simple. It was to see the routes in these areas. In the army, we always prepared for eventualities. The Army does not decide to go anywhere, but should we be asked to go anywhere, we must know where the routes are. In fact the army does not make any recommendation at all [that we should go for war or not]. Nothing like we should go to Tibet."<sup>32</sup>

He made his recommendations, nothing was impossible, after all Younghusband had done it 45 years earlier under much more daunting conditions. But it was purely a 'political' choice.

A few months later, the American *Chargé d'Affaires* was told by San Jevi [sic], an Indian intelligence official that at an "interdepartmental meeting

held to discuss Tibet it was decided [that the] most GOI could do was send moderate supply [of] small arms plus a few officers to instruct Tibetans how to use them." India was not ready to "become involved in any military adventures in Tibet."<sup>33</sup> It was understandable and in conformity with the logic of Nehru's philosophy of non-violence. At the same time, the Tibetan Government was advised not to 'rock the boat.' For this reason, a proposed British and American Mission in Tibet was cancelled.

### **Admission of Tibet at the UN**

Nobody was keen to support Tibet's demand of admission at the UN. The main argument of the Indian Government was that in the Security Council, the Soviet Union would use its veto and it would therefore be a waste of time and energy for everyone concerned. Further it would unnecessarily infuriate the Chinese.

A paper from the British Foreign Office clearly stated that: "while British still interested in Tibet maintaining its autonomy, Tibetan problem is almost exclusively of concern to India."<sup>34</sup>

When finally the matter of Tibet's admission in the UN was discussed between K.P.S. Menon and the US Ambassador, Menon was categorical: "...admission [of] Tibet [is] hopeless, [a] UN debate would unduly agitate Tibetan question and might provoke earlier action by Chinese Communists."

In the same dispatch, it appears that there were differing views among the senior Indian diplomats; the cable of Henderson said: "In absence Bajpai, British fear negative viewpoint set forth [in Embassy Telegram] will prevail."<sup>35</sup>

By that time, it was quite clear that, left alone, Nehru would tilt in favour of a more 'negative' approach to the Tibetan issue. One remark from Henderson gives quite a clear picture of the situation. India had the monopoly over not only the foreign policy of Tibet, but also its communications. In a cable to Acheson, he wrote: 'we have to recall that, in last analysis, we can communicate with Tibet now only via India, and

similarly that Tibet can only communicate with non-Communist world via India.”<sup>36</sup>

The strategic and political importance of India vis-à-vis Tibet was emphasised again and again by the Western powers and when the Tibetan issue came up for hearing at the UN in November 1950, it was once again the Indian position which would prevail. Except for Pakistan and Burma, no other country had any border with Tibet.

The fact that in early December the Government of India had already decided to recognize the new regime in Beijing was certainly not a fact that favoured the Tibetan point of view.

### **The Harishwar Dayal Mission**

Harishwar Dayal, the Political Officer in Sikkim visited Tibet for two months in September-October 1949. He returned to Delhi in early December. During his stay in the Tibetan capital he had a wide range of discussions with the Tibetan Kashag.

During his first meeting with Surkhang Shape and Luishar Thupten Tharpa, the talks centred mainly on the supply of arms and ammunition to the Tibetan Army and the revival of the ‘Better Family’ Regiment.<sup>37</sup>

Dayal argued that he saw the provision of training Tibetan troops as the main role for the Indian government.

The Kashag requested Dayal to supply 20 two-inch mortars, 20 three-inch mortars, 10,000 two-inch mortar bombs, 10,000 three-inch mortar bombs, 2,000,000 rounds of .303 rifle ammunition and 1,000,000 rounds of Sten gun ammunition.

Eventually an agreement was reached and the entire supply was delivered during the next couple of months. Only the request for anti-aircraft guns was turned down.

It was also agreed to train a detachment of twelve Tibetan soldiers in the use of Bren and Sten guns in Gyantse.

A few months earlier, an Indian Colonel had already visited Tibet and discussed this matter with Depon Kunsangtse, a Tibetan official. It was

accepted in principle that India would train some Tibetan troops in Gyantse.

In the second official meeting in November, the discussions were centered on the Tibetan Government's decision to increase the efforts of recruitment of their Army. They wanted to build a force of 100,000 against the then strength of 13,000. Richardson was of the opinion that 50,000 soldiers would be enough to defend the borders. The problem was who would equip this force?

By now the Kashag had understood that the Indian Government was the key, they wanted some assurance from the Government of India.

The Tibetans realized that even if the Americans or the British were ready to help, they could not do so without the active support and collaboration of the Government of India.

Dayal seemed mainly interested in the protection of the Indian trading posts at Gyantse and Yatung. We have to note here that at the end of the forties the Indian Government was still attached to its extraterritorial rights in Tibet. Delhi clearly saw the advantage and was not ready to surrender them under the pretext that they were 'imperialist rights.'

When Dayal came back to Delhi, he was impatiently awaited. He reported to his government but also informed the British High Commission of the situation in Lhasa and about his talks with the Tibetan Government.

Dayal brought also interesting news from his discussions with Richardson in Lhasa.

Contrary to the analysis by the Western powers, the Indian Agent in Lhasa believed that the Chinese Communists would "likely move into Tibet next summer [1950]."

Richardson had also forewarned about the infiltration of Communist agents into Bhutan, Nepal and India. He told Dayal that it was relatively simple for the Chinese to use this method.

One interesting point to note is that at the end of 1949, the British believed that Tibet was an independent nation though they were not ready to recognize it for fear of rocking the boat. This was confirmed by a cable from Henderson to Acheson<sup>38</sup> that said, "During the conversation Mr.

Graves showed me a Hansard report<sup>39</sup> of December 14, 1949, in which was published a letter from Mr. Eden to Dr. T.V. Soong<sup>40</sup> under date of August 5, 1943 and an accompanying memorandum setting forth the British position with respect to Tibet. Mr. Graves stated that it was his view that this still represented the British position in regard to Tibet."<sup>41</sup>

An officer of the Ministry of External Affairs told the American Ambassador in Delhi that for India, "no purpose would be served in raising question of political status of Tibet at this time. Ministry feels that making issue of Tibetan question at present might precipitate Communist decision invade pursuant their declared intention liberating country."<sup>42</sup>

Though the Indian officer said that his government had not yet decided about the application of Tibet in the UN, it is quite certain that it was out of question; Nehru's priority was the sponsorship of Communist China's entry in the UN and the Security Council.

Here also Patel did not agree with Nehru. He wrote to the Prime Minister on December 6: "It seems your intention is to recognize China soon after the UN session ends, even if it means that others are not ready by then or prepared to do so. My own feeling is that we do not stand to gain anything by giving a lead."

Nehru immediately replied: "Our advisors<sup>43</sup> are of opinion that it would be definitely harmful to recognize [China]... after the Commonwealth have done so. It would mean that we have no policy of our own, but follow the dictates of other countries."

The Government of India thought that after recognizing the Chinese Communist Government, they could 'initiate diplomatic talks 'with the Chinese regarding the status of Tibet. New Delhi was "strongly in favour of continuance Tibetan autonomy to same extent as has been case in past." On November 16, 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru had said in a press conference that "India has always recognized the suzerainty of the Chinese Government over Tibet but Tibet is considered as an autonomous unit and India's dealings with Tibet are on that basis."<sup>44</sup>

Nehru's Government was also quite clear about the military help for Tibet. They had "received number requests for arms and ammunition from

Tibetan Government, [they] had complied with some of these requests, and will send more in future. It cannot, however, render active military assistance in form of dispatch troops to Lhasa."<sup>45</sup>

This is confirmed by B.N. Mullik, the IB Director who recorded in his book *My Years with — China's Betrayal* the following account of a meeting with K.P.S. Menon, Panikkar and General Cariappa, the Indian Chief of the Army Staff: "On the question of India sending troops to stop the Chinese, Panikkar explained that legally India's action was indefensible. However, when the question was put to General Cariappa, he quite categorically said that he could not spare any troops or could spare no more than a battalion for Tibet: he was already pressed with commitments on the Pakistan front."

"He was also clear that this battalion could not go much further than Yatung or at the most might be able to place a company to Gyantse. Moreover, he explained that the Indian army was not equipped and trained to operate at such heights and would be at a serious disadvantage against the Chinese army which had much better training and experience in fighting in the extreme cold plateau and were even better armed, having acquired all the arms which the USA had poured into China to bolster the KMT army. What Carriapa said at that time was indeed very discouraging and disappointing because I had also favoured military intervention in Tibet to save it from China."<sup>46</sup>

As the end of 1949 neared, certain conclusions could be drawn.

First, India recognized Tibet more or less as an independent country. The Political Officer in Sikkim was dealing directly with the Tibetan Foreign Bureau in Lhasa and not through Beijing for all political and diplomatic matters related to Tibet.

Another proof of Tibet's status in the early years after India's Independence was that New Delhi was supplying arms and ammunition directly to Lhasa. Though these arms were meant for defence purpose, they were for all practical purposes to be used against a Chinese attack<sup>47</sup>.

Another factor which played an significant role in the following months was the over-importance of the role that Nehru wanted to play in world affairs.

The fate of Tibet was sealed.

On January 1, 1950, a first warning was heard in the broadcast of the New China News Agency; it proclaimed "the task for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for 1950 are to liberate Taiwan, Hainan and Tibet... Tibet is an integral part of China. Tibet has fallen under the influence of the imperialists."

Ten months later, independent Tibet was 'liberated'.

## ***Annexure***

### ***Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office***

*To: U.K. High Commissioner in India*

*REPD to: U.K. High Commissioner in Pakistan*

*(Send: 14.50, 10th December, 1949*

*No 3573 Secret*

Addressed to U.K. High Commissioner in India N. 3573 repeated for information to U.K. High Commissioner in Pakistan N. 2548  
My telegram No 3440 of 26th November (not repeated to Karachi)

### **Tibet**

Further question to be addressed to Foreign Secretary in House of Commons on Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> December, asking if he will publish in Hansard the terms of the memorandum sent in 1943 by U.K. Government to Chinese Government regarding Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.

2- Copy of the memorandum referred to was enclosed in my telegram (saving) No. 549 of 25th November

3- Proposed reply, which has not yet been submitted to Ministers is in the affirmative.

4- Please inform Indian Government

### **Memorandum to Dr Soong by the British Prime Minister**

5th August 1943

Dear Dr. Soong,

When you visited me on the 26th July, you spoke of Tibet and enquire as to our attitude.

I have pleasure in sending you the accompanying informal memorandum which I trust will serve to clear this matter up.

(signed) Anthony Eden

His Excellency,

Dr. T. V. Soong.

## **Tibet**

Since the Chinese Revolution of 1911, when Chinese forces were withdrawn from Tibet, Tibet has enjoyed de facto independence. She has ever since regarded herself as in practice completely autonomous and has opposed Chinese attempts to reassert control.

Since 1911, repeated attempts have been made to bring about an accord between China and Tibet. It seemed likely that agreement could be found on the basis that Tibet should be autonomous under the nominal suzerainty of China, and this was the basis of the draft tripartite (Chinese-Tibetan-British) convention of 1914 which was initialled by the Chinese representative but was not ratified by the Chinese Government. The rock on which the convention and subsequent attempts to reach an understanding were wrecked was not the question of autonomy (which was expressly admitted by China) but was the question of the boundary between China and Tibet, since the Chinese Government claimed sovereignty over areas which the Tibetan Government claimed belonged exclusively to their autonomous jurisdiction.

The boundary question, however, remained insuperable and, since the delay in reaching agreement was hampering the development of more normal relations between India and Tibet, eventually in 1921 the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Lord Curzon) informed the then Chinese Minister (Dr. Wellington Koo) that the British Government did not feel justified in withholding any longer their recognition of the status of Tibet as an autonomous State under the suzerainty of China, and intended dealing on this basis with Tibet in the future.

This is the principle which has since guided the attitude of the British Government towards Tibet. They have always been prepared to recognise Chinese suzerainty over Tibet but only on the understanding that Tibet is regarded as autonomous. Neither the British Government nor the Government of India have any territorial ambitions in Tibet but they are interested in the maintenance of friendly relations with, and in the preservation of peaceful conditions in an area which is coterminous with the North-East frontiers of India. They would welcome any amicable

arrangements which the Chinese Government might be disposed to make with Tibet whereby the latter recognised Chinese suzerainty in return for an agreed frontier and an undertaking to recognise Tibetan autonomy and they would gladly offer any help desired by both parties to this end.

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<sup>1</sup> Mainly the offspring of the aristocratic and business families of Lhasa or Kham.

<sup>2</sup> Like Bapa Phuntsok Wangyal or Rabga Pandatsang.

<sup>3</sup> Though Sir Charles Bell, see Tsering Shakya, *Tibet and the League of Nations*, Tibet Journal, Vol. 10, No. 3, Dharamsala, p. 48-56.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson, *Tibet & Its History*, Shambala, Boulder 1984, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed by the Government of India and China*, Vol. 2, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Delhi 1959, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> The Tibetans claimed the 'lost' territories of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Arunachal Pradesh and certain parts of Ladakh before ratifying any treaty. The Chinese will use this Tibetan claim to claim all these areas in turn as part of the People's Republic. The conflict of 1962 was born out of these claims.

<sup>7</sup> The Tibetan Cabinet of Ministers.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the Dalai Lama, March 1997.

<sup>9</sup> In July-August 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Foreign Affairs Record, April 1959, IV, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> Richardson, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> W.D. Tsepon Shakabpa, *Tibet: a Political History*, Potala Corporation, New York 1967, p. 295.

<sup>13</sup> A ceremonial scarf made of silk used to welcome a guest or present to a host; a symbol of pure heart and a wish for a long life.

<sup>14</sup> Melville Goldstein, *The Fall of the Lamaist State*, University of California Press 1989, p. 574.

<sup>15</sup> B.N. Mullik *My Years with Nehru — The Chinese Betrayal*, Allied Publishers, Delhi 1971, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> On June 11, 1948.

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, op. cit., p. 176.

<sup>18</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Series II, (thereafter, *SWJN*), Vol. 9, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, p. 471.

Record of Nehru's talks with the Tibetan trade mission led by Tsepon Shakabpa at New Delhi on 8 January 1949 as reported in the minutes.

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<sup>19</sup> It was reported that the Head of Tibetan State Department at Lhasa had shut off the Nationalist Radio Station in Lhasa on 8 July 1949, asked the Nationalist Government's branch office to close down and ordered all officers to leave.

<sup>20</sup> SWJN, Vol. 12, p. 411.

Cable to Harishwar Dayal, Political Officer in Sikkim to New Delhi dated 26 July 1949.

<sup>21</sup> Later known as Chief Ministers.

<sup>22</sup> SWJN, Vol. 10, p. 303.

Letter to the Premiers dated 1 April 1949.

<sup>23</sup> SWJN, Vol. 11, p. 389.

Note to the Foreign Secretary, 5 June 1949.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> SWJN, Vol. 10, p. 464.

Speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs on 22 March 1949.

<sup>26</sup> SWJN, Vol. 13, p. 260.

Letter to John Matthai.

<sup>27</sup> The same policy would be followed in Kashmir, Nepal and Sikkim. Under the pretext of social reforms, the Indian Government encouraged the forces ready to work against the established hierarchy.

<sup>28</sup> The Office of the Historian of the Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, (thereafter USFR), 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China), Washington D.C.

Telegram 893.00/11-2149 from The Chargé in India (Donovan) to the Secretary of State, New Delhi, November 21, 1949.

<sup>29</sup> SWJN, Vol. 14, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> And unfortunately at the end of 1950's.

<sup>31</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 893.00/11-2149 from The Chargé in India (Donovan) to the Secretary of State, New Delhi, November 21, 1949.

<sup>32</sup> Personal Interview with the author.

<sup>33</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 893.00/11-2149 from The Chargé in India (Donovan) to the Secretary of State, New Delhi, November 21, 1949.

<sup>34</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 893.00 Tibet/12-1249 from the Chargé in the United Kingdom (Holmes) to the Secretary of State London, December 12, 1949.

<sup>35</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 501.AA/12-1449 from the Ambassador in India (Henderson) to the Secretary of State New Delhi, December 14, 1949.

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<sup>36</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 893.00 Tibet/12-1549 from the Ambassador in India (Henderson) to the Secretary of State New Delhi, December 15, 1949.

<sup>37</sup> The Trongdra Regiment.

<sup>38</sup> The Chinese Foreign Minister in visit to London in 1943.

<sup>39</sup> The Hansard reports are the printed transcripts of parliamentary debates in the Westminster system of government.

<sup>40</sup> See text in annexure.

<sup>41</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 893.00 Tibet/12-2149. Memorandum of conversation with the Director of the Office of Chinese Affairs (Sprouse) [Washington] December 21, 1949.

<sup>42</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Telegram 893.00 Tibet/12-3049 from the Ambassador in India (Henderson) to the Secretary of State, New Delhi, December 30, 1949.

<sup>43</sup> Most probably K.M. Panikkar and V.K. Krishna Menon.

<sup>44</sup> SWJN, Vol. 14, p. 191.

<sup>45</sup> USFR, 1949, Vol. IX, (The Far East: China)

Discussion with Jha, Joint Secretary, MEA, Government of India in USFR, Telegram from The Ambassador in India (Henderson) to the Secretary of State, New Delhi, December 30, 1949 - 1pm.

<sup>46</sup> B.N. Mullik, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>47</sup> However, the Government of India was not ready to get involved in a full-fledged war on the Tibetan High Plateau.