

INDIA AND TIBET

—Geographical Considerations—

—NIRMAL C. SINHA

I

No two scholars or no two explorers would agree about the precise territorial limits of Tibet. This would be as much true in 1900-07 when both Britain and Russia were determined to keep the other power out of Tibet as of 1951-54 when China finally incorporated Tibet into the fold of the Great Han Motherland and made considerable changes in the eastern and northern parts of what was once Tibet. Besides no definition of Tibet could be satisfactory both for the anthropologist and the philologist.

For Tibet in the first half of this century a British military report of 1910 may be quoted: "Tibet lies in the heart of the Asiatic Continent, and extends roughly from the 79th to the 103rd degree of east longitude, and from the 28th to the 37th degree of north latitude. It is bounded on the north and east by the Chinese provinces of Turkistan, Mongolia, Kan-su, Ssu-chuan, and Yunnan; and on the south and west by the British territories or dependencies of Assam, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, British Garhwal, Tehri Garhwal, Bashahr, Kangra, and Kashmir. It will thus be seen that Great Britain and China are the only two countries whose territories are coterminous with those of Tibet."

"The actual boundaries of Tibet, especially to the north and east, are ill-defined and frequently non-existent. It is therefore difficult to estimate the area of the country with any exactitude, but, including all the country south of the Altyn Tagh and Nan Shan mountains, it may be taken as some 600,000 square miles, and may be said to approximate to the areas of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Bengal, the United Provinces, the Punjab, and Bombay, put together". [The Indian provinces named here were as in 1910.]

In a well-known Tibetan geographical work composed in 1820 by a Mongol scholar, Bla-ma Btsan-po, occurs the following description of Tibet.

"Figuring roughly north and north east of the country of India or bordering on the north from Bhangga-la is the country of Tibet..... The country of Tibet is the region of Himavat which is the land converted by Avalokitesvara. That country (Himavat) is much higher than the other surrounding countries. It is a region, where both in summer and winter, the heat and cold are minimized, and the fear of famine, beasts of prey, poisonous serpents, poisonous insects, heat and cold are not great.

"(Besides) the snow-mountains and other mountains there are great lakes of clear cool sparkling water in many sections of the country. And various rivers and tributaries, which possess the eight qualities of water

This article presents the author's lecture at Calcutta University on 19 July 1977. A synopsis of the author's three lectures entitled "India and Tibet—a study in inter-dependence" is appended at the end.

“There are a great many forests, grassy regions, and alpine meadows there, and although the arable fields and summer pastures are not large in size, there are no desert plains or saline regions”.

Several points in the above description may be noticed. Tibet is located as India's neighbour; India as the Land of Enlightenment is not only the most coveted neighbour but forms also Tibet's high way to the Mahasindhu. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is, in Tibetan legend, credited with having begotten the man in Tibet, and also credited with converting Tibet into Dharma through incarnations beginning with King Srongtsen Gampo. Later when the Tibetan monarchy collapsed incarnations of Avalokitesvara came to rule Tibet; these incarnations are the Dalai Lamas of Tibet.

The references to temperate climate, grassy regions, arable fields and absence of famine do reflect facts of a highland with sparse population, and significantly enough there is little reference to mines and minerals, which were not unknown. Besides for a Mongolian, with experience of cold in Mongolia and north China and of heat in north India, climate of Tibet was an ideal one. More important than mines and minerals were the food crops: barley, wheat, buck wheat, maize, millet, oats, peas and even rice. Snow mountains, great lakes and mighty rivers indeed made Tibet a happy land. An ancient hymn describes Tibet as “The centre of snow mountains; the source of great rivers: a lofty country and a pure land”.

II

As the source of great rivers, Tibet, more than any other country, has shaped the history of Asia; it will be fair to describe both India and China as gifts par excellence of the rivers of Tibet. Appropriately much of this paper on ‘Geographical Considerations’ may be devoted to the rivers of Tibet. These are : the Indus, the Sutlej, the Gogra or Karnali—an affluent of the Ganges, the Tsang-po or Brahmaputra, the Hwang Ho or Yellow River, the Yangtse Kiang, the Mekong and the Salween. If the Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan affluents of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, the eastern Tibetan affluents of the Yangtse Kiang, and the inland rivers of the Kun Lun and the Chang Thang are added, Tibet may be counted as the biggest and the most potent hydrographic entity in Asia. The major rivers may be described here. What are the major rivers of Tibet?

In Tibetan imagery, built upon ancient Buddhist lore, the major rivers of Tibet are those that originated in the Kailas-Manassarovar area and flowed over the Himalayas through the Aryabhumi into the high seas. Traditionally four rivers of India are thus associated with snow cliffs or glacial cones which once looked like animal heads from distance. There are several versions of these ‘animal heads’ and the streams pouring out of the ‘animal mouths’. The Lhasa version may be presented here. The Tachok Khabab (Falls from the Horse's Mouth) flows eastward, joins the Kyichu River south of Lhasa—and ultimately becomes the Brahmaputra in Assam and Bengal. The Langchen Khabab (Falls from the Elephant's Mouth) flows southward to become the Sutlej in the Punjab. The Mapcha Khabab (Falls from the Peacock's Mouth) flows south west and becomes the holy Ganga when it reaches Hardwar. The Sengye Khabab (Falls from the Lion's Mouth) flows west and becomes Sindhu in Kashmir, and its estuary is called Sindh.

Tibetan theory about the Ganges originating in the catchment of Kailas-Mansarovar is not merely based on the Sanskrit *Abhidharmakosha* or earlier Pali records. Even as late as the second half of the eighteenth century Tibetan pilgrims and merchants are known to have seen the 'animal head' out of which streamed forth the Ganga. Cho-je Pa-trul and Lama Tsanpo record from hearsay as in ancient tradition as well as from knowledge of pilgrims and other on-the-spot observers. While orthodox Hindus, in both north and south India, would locate this lost source of the Ganges to a sub-terrestrial glacier connecting with Gangotri glacier, more modern minds would straightway reject the story of the Tibetan origins of the Ganges as a myth. As one humbly claiming to know both the soil and the soul of Tibet, this author would only refer to the peculiarities of the Roof of the World. In Tibet mountains have been rising; depressions have been sinking; lakes, rivers and glaciers have been shifting—and all these even in the historic past within one millennium.

Glacial icefields on the south of the Kailas Mountains are known to have changed very much in dimensions and directions; the great swamp near Lhasa in the mid-17th century provides today the hard landing ground for the heaviest jets. It is thus no wonder that the ancient source of the Ganges is lost today due to diverse and simultaneous processes of dessication, erosion, winds and tectonics.

Under compulsion of events the Hindu pilgrims for Jvalamukhi had to set up a temple in Kangra; likewise a Mount Kailas and a Lake Manas had to be found on the southern slopes of the Himalayas; Sankaracharya is known to have sanctified the Badrinath Temple in place of that near Tholing on the northern slopes of the Himalayas. So when a relentless Nature dried up or buried the first fountain head, the Hindus found the Gangotri as equally hazardous spot for pilgrimage.

It is relevant to point out that unlike Sindhu, Satadru and Brahmaputra, the term Ganga is not of pure or true Indic origin. The word is not known in Vedic period and modern scholars have justifiably traced it to Tibeto-Burman diction. In Tibetan language the river is celebrated as Ganga, and it is derived from terms Gangri (Snow mountain) and Bumo (Daughter). That perhaps settles the issue in favour of Ganga's Tibetan origins.

A major river, in Tibetan tradition, is not necessarily a mighty river as understood in modern terms. What makes a river major in Tibet is its source and the sacred fountain head for major rivers is Kailas-Mansarovar. Thus in ancient times when the Oxus and the Sita rivers—or their principal affluents—streamed out of the Kailas range, these came to be ranked as major rivers. The rivers, Hwang Ho and Yangtse Kiang or Mekong and Salween, rising in the eastern highlands were no doubt as sacred as any rivers in Tibet but did never attain the high sanctity of rivers like the Ganga, the Sindhu or the Brahmaputra.

As if annoyed with this treatment, the mighty rivers—Hwang Ho, Yangtse Kiang, Mekong and Salween—are pushing back their sources ever further westward and this process has been noticed by the Tibetans and Baba elements in eastern Tibet during the last one hundred years or a little more.

In India—till the neighbours on the west and the east claimed share

over the waters of the Sindhu, the Ganga and the Brahmaputra—there was no interest in the origins of the rivers; in China from the time of Emperor Chien Lung a systematic probe into the headwaters of the Hwang Ho and Yangtse Kiang has been carried out on a national scale. The Han colonial pressure in eastern Tibet, both in the north and south, has been a movement of rice-eating population crowding along the river banks. Thus by the second quarter of the twentieth century the Kokonor region, where the present Dalai Lama was born (1935), was a Han dominated area where the only language taught in the schools was Chinese.

With the events of 1950-51 when the People's Republic of China completed the occupation of the entire highlands stretching from 100° degree to 79° degree east longitude, Chinese scientists made a thorough probe into hydrography of what they called the Tibet Region of China and arrived at the following conclusions.

“In the course of the centuries the immense energy of the rivers in Tibet has gone to waste. Only in a few places have the Tibetans adapted it for the turning of millstones powered by water wheels. Possessing huge reserves of power, the Tibetan rivers in the very near future, as the economy is developed in the Chinese People's Republic, including development in Tibet itself, can be used for the production of electric power. A scientific expedition conducting research in Tibet in 1951-53 searched out and estimated the available reserves of hydro-electric power. The Tsangpo attracted the special attention of the researchers, it being in the basin of this river that the economic life of Tibet is concentrated. According to preliminary calculations, the Tsangpo in its middle and lower course can produce 62 million kilowatt hours of electric power. The best prospects of the Tsangpo are two sectors where the river flows in narrows and where it carries large volumes of water and has its maximum energy. The first sector—Yuetszyuy—is situated somewhat to the west of the city of Chushul (Tsyuyshuy). The discharge of water at low water is here equal to 57.5 cubic meters per second. For a distance of 20 kilometers the slope of the river is almost 90 meters. The Tsangpo possesses still greater power; on an average the discharge is 130 cubic meters per second and the slope in a distance of 40 kilometers is 280 meters. Above these sectors are situated broad sections of valley which can be utilized perfectly as natural reservoirs. Further to the east at the bend of the Tsangpo (the Bomi Region) conditions for the construction of a hydro-electric station are still more favourable since the climate becomes moister, more moderate and warmer, the velocity of flow and the level of the water in the river become more stable. For the development of electric power in Tibet the upper courses of the Salween, Mekong and Yangtse Rivers will also take on significance. They are separated by narrow water divides where there are eight suitable sites, which together with one tributary, the Botuy-Tszanbu, possess according to preliminary data, a total complex of power of 1,070,460 horsepower. Three sites have a power potential between 30,000–50,000 horsepower, three between 70,000–100,000 horsepower, one—130,000 horsepower, one 360,000 horsepower and the Botuy-Tszanbu has 15 suitable sites with a total power of 160,000 horsepower”.

The above estimate represents the minimum expectations as the development projects and river training projects during the last twenty years have yielded further potentials. The point for interest in any discussion about

“India and Tibet” is simply this: if the course of Tsangpo (as Brahmaputra is called in Tibet), particularly through the sharp bends and steep cataracts in Kongbo, is in the hands of scientists and technologists hostile to India the prospects for India will be indeed gloomy.

III

A grateful imagination of the ancient peoples in the Indo-Gangetic plains had fixed the fountain head of all the gifts of good living in Mount Sumeru in far north. Chinese Buddhist cosmography would locate Mount Sumeru somewhere along the Kun Lun Mountains. Tibetan tradition would make a more precise identification viz Mount Kailas. Scholars and scientists of modern India should wake up to the historical significance of the mythical mountain.

Scholars and scientists of modern India should also note with gratitude that while, in the medieval times and till the British conquest, our intelligentsia had but vague notions of Indianhood or Indianness, Tibetan intelligentsia—monks and scholars—merchants and officials—had a firm sense of India as a great country and as one country. And this was shared by even the illiterate peasants and nomads.

Two countries loomed large in the imagination of all Tibetans. These were China and India, both great in extent, width or size: rgya or Gya. China was designated Gyanag (rgya-nag), that is, a great country where people dressed in black; India was designated Gyagar (rgya-gar), that is, a great country where people dressed in white and where people's food was mostly white, that is, rice, sugar and vegetarian dishes.

An honorific description for India was Phagyul ('phags-yul), that is, Aryadesha, Noble Land or Land of Enlightenment. Another description, Phagthung ('phags-khrungs) or Birthplace of the Holy Ones, stretches this Land of Enlightenment much beyond Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Varanasi and Kusinagara and covers the entire sub-continent from Kashmira to Kanchipuram and from Gandhara to Kamarupa.

For Buddhas and Bodhisattvas had blessed all parts of Jamvudvipa. Buddha Sakyamuni was born in Kapilavastu; Asoka was born in Magadha, Kanishka ruled in Kashmir and Punjab; Nagarjuna came from Andhrapradesha; Aryadeva came from Simhala; Asanga and Vasubandhu were natives of Purushapura; Dignaga was from Kanchipuram; Dharmakirti was born in Tirumallapuram; Guru Padmasambhava, born in Suvastu, had visited the Kamarupa Lohit regions; the first monastery of Tibet, Samye or Achintya, was named after the Ajanta in Maharashtra. These and hundred other facts, a modern Indian could learn in the monasteries of Tibet as this author did two decades ago. It was also learned that Gyagar Key (rgya-gar-skad) or the Language of India was Sanskrit.

Earthquakes are frequent in Tibet and Tibetans live with earthquakes but would associate unusual occurrences with tragedies at home. An intense earthquake occurred in Lhasa on 15 August 1947; no less than 40 individual shocks were heard and houses rocked and rattled. That was Tibet's protest against the disruption of the age old unity of the Land of Enlightenment.

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INDIA AND TIBET

—A STUDY IN INTERDEPENDENCE—

SYNOPSIS

The theme will be presented in three lectures under the captions: (1) India and Tibet—Geographical Considerations; (2) India and Tibet—Historical Considerations; and (3) India and Tibet—Material Considerations.

The first lecture presents the theme of India and Tibet being a geographical unit, a unit of physical interdependence; India being more at the receiving end than Tibet. The second lecture presents the fact of India and Tibet in the past being in the same world of cultural, moral and spiritual values; Tibet being more at the receiving end than India. The third and concluding lecture contends that neither India nor Tibet could afford to have a hostile, indifferent or non-cooperative neighbour. Both for economic considerations and security reasons, Tibet and India have to cultivate active mutual aid in the race for survival.

The expressions India and Tibet in these three lectures would generally refer to the two geographical entities as known till the middle of this century. For India the terminal date is 1947 and for Tibet the terminal date is 1951. India and Tibet are, in these lectures, by and large, terms of human and cultural geography and either expression (India or Tibet) stands more for the soul of a people than for the soil of a country. The three lectures in totality, however, trace the inter-relationship between the matter and the spirit.

The pioneer scholars and leading authorities whose works are being drawn upon are listed at the end of each lecture. Specific and detailed references to their works and publications are not made for the simple reason that the author has weighed fully the data provided by these pioneers and authorities with his own findings and therefore this author takes full responsibility for the facts stated and the opinions expressed in these three lectures. This responsibility is entirely personal or individual on the part of this author and no office or institution with which this author is or was ever connected should in any way be associated with the facts and opinions expressed in these lectures. NCS 19.7.77
