

# Review of Socio-Political Development in Tibet (600-1950)

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**T**he political history of Tibet manifests the shifting basis of power and influence. For the earlier rulers, force or strength might have been the critical determinant of political domination. However, Tibetan society underwent revolutionary change with the introduction of Buddhism which gradually permeated every aspect of life. It provided conducive condition for the emergence of unique religio-political system which came to be known as Choe-si-nyiden form of government.

This paper attempts to trace the socio-political developments of Tibet in course of centuries and then deals with structure of government under Choe-si-nyiden form of government. The paper concludes with highlight of factors which could have evolved the ancient nation into a modern nation state.

## (I)

Much before the Choe-si-nyiden form of government, Tibet had been governed by the monarchy system with unbroken line of forty two kings ruling over the ancient land of Tibet upto the ninth century<sup>1</sup>. The recorded history of Tibet starts from the seventh century when Tibet emerged as a formidable military power in Central Asia under the thirty-third king, Song-Tsen-Gampo. Although the Tibetan kings represented the embodiment of power in its most primitive form—force, and although force was indeed the practical basis of their rule, it seems they could not do so on a long term basis without some justification to make use of force legitimate. So the earlier rulers claimed to be divine descendants and the possession of magical power. The first king, Gnya-khri-tsen-po, believed to have descent from the “country of Gods” above the sky to rule the six tribes of Tibet, he and six of his successors were beleived to have “returned to the sky when they died by means of a sky-cord”. Similarly, when Tho-Thori Gnyan Tsan mysteriously received the first Buddhist text, it was believed to have “descended from the sky”. These myths provided extra human sanction to legitimize their rule<sup>2</sup>.

Song-Tsen-Gampo and successive kings fiercely competed with other nations for domination of Central Asia and laid the foundation of Tibetan Empire in Central Asia<sup>3</sup>. At the sametime Song-Tsen Gampo played pioneering role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet. The written script in Tibetan language was invented during his time to translate the Buddhist sacred books. He introduced legal code for the nation based on the teachings of Buddha. This period is

regarded as the dawn of Tibetan civilization<sup>4</sup>. The imperial tasks and pious deeds initiated by Song-Tsan-Gampo were carried on by the successive kings. Despite their abiding sympathy for Buddhism, the successive kings had to allow both Bon, the indigenous religion, and Buddhism to exist side by side as Bon was too powerful to be ousted altogether. Subsequently, some elements of Bon religion had been absorbed and made subservient to the Tibetan Buddhism<sup>5</sup>. However, Buddhism had not become a mass phenomenon during the reign of these kings. In fact, there seems to be no evidence to prove that any of the Tibetan kings has ever called himself or was called by his contemporaries as Choegyal. It was an honourific title conferred posthumously to those Tibetan kings who were believed to have patronised Buddhism by the authors of Choe Byung works and by other lama scholars in gratitude<sup>6</sup>.

Along with the establishment of an extensive empire, there developed constant rivalry among the noble families to have dominant influence in the court. The rival families employed religion as a pretext to justify their clash of interests. King Ral-pa Can was murdered by his brother, Lang-dar-ma, who led the anti-Buddhist party. Pro Bon ministers helped Lang-dar-ma to succeed to the throne. They embarked on the task of destroying Buddhism almost to extinction. Eventually Lang-dar-ma was in turn assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 842. With him came to an end the imperial age of Tibetan history.

After the assassination of Lang-dar-ma, the Tibetan kingdom had been disintegrated into a number of princedoms which were nearly always at logger heads with each other. The rulers of these princedoms regarded the patronage of Buddhism as a matter of social prestige and means of political rivalry. Thus this period witnessed not only renewal but also renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism. During this period the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism, Nyingmapa, Kadampa, Kagyupa and Sakyapa took shape, most of the great lama scholars wrote their monumental works and also did the excellent translations of the Buddhist classics into Tibetan that fuelled the renaissance. Thus Buddhism was transformed from a courtly interest into social force which eventually engulfed the whole of Tibet<sup>7</sup>. Rival royal families patronized various religious sects in a bid to regain their power and prestige. Thus once again the political struggle drew its vigour from rivalries between religious sects. The religious sects, having acquired by this time great authority, had become a new power in the politics of Tibet and were gradually replacing noble families in terms of influence and prestige in the society<sup>8</sup>.

When the Mongols were carrying out their expansionist policy in the thirteenth century, Tibet was also invaded by Changis Khan's second son, Godan Khan. In 1247, Godan Khan selected the most eminent Lama of the day, Sakya Pandita, as virtual ruler of Tibet. Godan Khan's choice of Sakya Pandita was deliberate as the Sakya Lama enjoyed high reputation in Tibet. Subsequent hereditary abbots of the Sakya Sect was recognised by the Mongol Yuan Emperors of China as the highest authority of Tibet. Thus began the system of ruler in whose hands earthly authority and the prestige of religious sanctity were united.

Ideas underlying the legitimacy of Sakya Lama's rule was a complex amalgam of Bon, Buddhist myths as well as Chinese imperial notions. At the Buddhist level, the Sakya Lamas claimed to be the manifestation of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of knowledge and wisdom. This claim probably originated with the Sakya Pandita's reputation for learning. Despite the fact that they used every conceivable idea to legitimize their rule, the priest politician role was "far from being accepted in Tibet". The lay nobility and other sects were "jealous of the supremacy of Sakya<sup>9</sup>". They grudgingly accepted the authority of the Sakya as long as the Mongols had to be feared and respected. The Sakya ruled over Tibet for about hundred years. The Sakya Lamas remain the historic transition from royal authority based on force to Lamaist authority based on religious belief.

In 1358 the rule of Sakya Lamas were overthrown by Chang-chub-Gyaltzen who brought nearly the whole of Tibet under his sway. Thus began the rule Phamo Drukpa period which lasted till 1434. The Phamo Drukpa's family was closely connected with Sakya sects rival, Kargyupa sect. Lamenting over the weakened position of Tibet, Chang-chub Gyaltzen embarked on the task of fostering a feeling of national unity and revived the tradition and glories of the early kings<sup>10</sup>. Phamo Drukpa's rule was eventually ousted in 1434 by the Rimpung princes who had the backing of the Karmapa sect. The influence of the Karmapa heirarchs was also important to the success of the Tsang kings who ruled Tibet after the Rimpung family.

These historical developments bear testimony to the fact that it was impossible for any non-priest, no matter how powerful he might have been, to rule Tibet without some religious sanction and active support provided by one religious sect or the other.

Gelugpa sect is the last major religious sect formed in Tibetan Buddhism. Tsongkapa (1357-1419), the founder of Gelugpa sect, aimed to reform Buddhism in Tibet by stressing on the need to return to greater austerity and spirituality. This new sect gained popularity not only within the country but also within a short span of time commended the spritual allegiance of almost all the rival tribes of Mongolia. The success of the new monastic order created hostility. Gelugpa sect was harassed by the king of Tsang. The Gelugpa turned to the Mongol for help. In 1642, A Mongol prince, Gushi Khan, proceeded into Tibet where he defeated the king of Tsang and conferred on the head of Gelugpa sect, the Fifth Dalai Lama, the supreme authority over Tibet. Since then the ten successive Dalai Lamas ruled over Tibet.

The Dalai Lama has been beleived to be the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, who is regarded in Tibetan tradition as the founder and protector of Tibetan race. Although Gelugpa sect was not the first one to introduce the theory of reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism, it proved to be of a decisive importance for the Tibetan polity as it legitimized the political succession since the seventeenth century. For over three hundred years, the successive Dalai Lamas have been the spritual and the

temporal rulers of Tibet He is recognised as such by other religious sects in Tibet. Thus the office of the Dalai Lama became the summit of the religio-political fabric of Tibetan system which brought into fusion the temporal and spiritual leadership and converted Tibet from a land torn by political and religious strife into a single nation under the central theocratic government<sup>11</sup>.

Apart from the pure religious sanction, the Dalai Lama's indisputable authority rested on the military protection provided by Mongols and Chinese, while the pacifist nature of Buddhism killed the Tibetan martial spirit. The domestic political basis of the Dalai Lama's rule was provided by the large number of monks and monasteries. The spiritual and temporal ascendancy of the Dalai Lama also represents the culmination of the long process of rivalry and adjustment between the religious hierarchy and lay nobility<sup>12</sup>.

(II)

Tibetan government established under the Dalai Lamas was described as Choe-si-nyiden. While in organizational sense it meant a dyarchy of clerical and lay elements, in ideological sense it meant a synthesis-harmonious blend of religion and politics<sup>13</sup>. The government was expected to work for the people's temporal happiness in this world and for spiritual happiness in the world thereafter. Throughout the complex government structure, religious and secular affairs were intricately intertwined.

At the head of the structure was the Dalai Lama<sup>14</sup>. He was an absolute ruler with all authorities converging in his hand. During the time when a Dalai Lama had yet to be identified and if he was a minor, his power was exercised by a regent, normally a high Lama chosen by the National Assembly. As regent lacked the Dalai Lama's ultimate authority and prestige, no regent could be as active and innovative as a Dalai Lama and consequently the rule of the regents was sometime characterized by political stagnation and also by corruption.

The Chikyab Kenpo, Lord Chamberlain, served as the Dalai Lama's link with both the religious and the secular administrative staff. He was selected by the Dalai Lama himself. His direct access to the Dalai Lama made him an influential person.

The secular administration was headed by a Prime Minister and a cabinet. The thirteenth Dalai Lama appointed three Prime Ministers, two layman and a monk who acted jointly in deciding matters of state. The fourteenth Dalai Lama appointed two Prime Ministers during his rule in Tibet, one monk and one layman, who also acted jointly. The Prime Ministers, in case of Tibet did not perform usual functions associated with a Prime Minister. They acted as liaison between the cabinet and the Dalai Lamas, as well as to assume some functions that the Dalai Lama wanted to avoid, such as final action in criminal cases. All final authority remained in the hands of the Dalai Lama. The position of Prime Minister was therefore not as important as the title implies, although the Prime Minister enjoyed considerable personal influence and held second rank in the hierarchical structure of the government.

Most of the executive work in the secular field was handled by the Kashag (Cabinet). It was composed of four Kalons (Ministers), three of these Kalons were lay officials and one was high-ranking monk official. The Kalons were appointed by the Dalai Lama or the regent. They held third rank. The Kashag had power over the internal administration of the country in the matters relating to politics, revenue and justice. No Kalon held any specific portfolio and they used to make joint decisions.

In accordance with the dual function of the Dalai Lama's rule, the administrative structure of the government was divided into a religious and a secular segment. But these two segments were not exclusive as their functions overlapped with each other, especially the religious segment exercising power over the secular matters.

The religious administration was handled by the Tsyigtsang, the peak ecclesiastical secretariat, headed by four high monk officials who held the fourth rank. They handled the affairs of all monk officials and dealt with matters relating to monastic affairs. Their authority often extended into secular affairs in many crucial respect as well, such as adjudication of civil suits, their role as chairman of the National Assembly and so on.

The lay officials were derived from the aristocratic families, who were permitted to retain their estates in exchange for the obligation to provide at least one son per estate to serve as an official in the government. The candidates received practical training in the Tsikang, the office of Revenue and if found adequately prepared, the heads of the department recommended to the Kashag for appointment to official rank. From among them, the Cabinet selected its appointees to administrative positions in Central Government as well as in the province and district office. The ratio between the officials and people were very wide. The disproportion between the number of officials and the numbers of people whose affairs they were to manage, reflects the limited scope of governmental action. It indicates that social and economic affairs to a large extent were carried on outside the framework of the government and its officials.

The traditional structure also had the National Assembly which was regarded as representing the whole nation. The Assembly was composed of both lay and monk officials including abbots and representatives of the three great Gelugpa monasteries near Lhasa as well as representatives of every class and professions such as artists, craftsman, soldiers and tradesman- a total of about seven hundred people. It met only when called into sessions during times of crisis or to seek opinion before taking major decision by the government. Although it had no actual legislative function or control over the executive, its views were taken into account by the Dalai Lama and the Kashag while making policy decision.

### (III)

Although the Dalai Lama had supreme authority in the country and the powers were centralized in the national government, Tibetan society in general was not

tightly controlled and regulated. Tibet had none of the complex organizations run by large bureaucracy, legal structures and above all state coercive power with which modern society functions. On the contrary, Tibet had small number of officials in proportion to the population and it was also known for the almost complete absence of any police force. The government was based on a voluntary acceptance of its authority which was inspired by the religious faith of Tibetans. Due to the limited nature of the government activities, indomitable spirits of the Tibetans and existence of unique socio-cultural traditions, one could trace certain democratic elements in the traditional Tibetan society.

One such element is noticeable in the Buddhist religion in general and the Tibetan monastic organization in particular. Buddhism, which pervades every aspect of Tibetan life, preaches equality of all human beings. Indian history shows that Buddhism condemned the caste system and gave hope to the people in the lower social ladder. Through the doctrine of Karma, each individual is made responsible for his or her present life and life hereafter by his or her positive or negative deeds. Tibet's monastic system provided unrestrained opportunities for social mobility<sup>15</sup>. Admission to monastic institution was open to all and all class distinction in Tibetan society was overcome within the organization. The monasteries offered equal opportunities to all to rise to any height through their own scholarship. Thus a son of humble family could reach highest religious and administrative office if he had required capabilities and wisdom. There is a popular Tibetan saying: "If the mother's son has the knowledge, the golden throne of Gaden (the highest position in the hierarchy of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism) has no ownership".

The monasteries were also known for democratic management of their internal affairs. In a sense, administration of a monastery could be compared to that of constitutional monarchy, the head of the monastery was usually an incarnated lama or else an abbot, and in most cases he was appointed by the Dalai Lama from a number of candidates selected by a committee of monks of that monastery. Important matters of the monastery were decided in a formal assembly which was usually held once a month and chaired by a senior monk or in a special sessions called by the abbot. In small monasteries, all the fully ordained monks participated in the assembly; in large monasteries, each unit send a representative to the assembly. Some monks were incharge of religious activities and some were of economic activities of the monastery. All of them under the direction of the abbot and supervised by the assembly. Thus, monasteries of all sects had autonomy in managing their internal affairs and most of them had tradition of democratic management<sup>16</sup>.

The Dalai Lama was found through a system of reincarnation that ensured that the rule of Tibet did not become hereditary. It had a great advantage over other available forms of succession- monarchical heredity or selection by aristocratic oligarchy. It is the monastic order which had the large degree of social mobility, that had the crucial role in selecting the Dalai Lama's incarnations. Most of the Dalai Lamas including the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth,

came from common peasant families in remote parts of Tibet. Once discovered, the Dalai Lamas had to undergo vigorous training and education to build up his charismatic qualities which needs to be proved and be recognised by his people<sup>17</sup>.

In theory, Tibet had a centralized system of government with concentration of all powers with the national government at Lhasa. But the effective central control over the whole of the country was problematic because of the great distances between different parts of the country and the difficulty of pre-modern communication system on horseback or runners over large stretches of land with scarce population. Therefore in practice evolved a limited government not only in terms of central control but also control by region or local governments over the people. The traditional society developed high degree of social cooperation among the people in the community. It also provided scope for the development of indigenous leadership and organization to manage the affairs at village, town and city level. Further, the people were economically self-sufficient. So they could enjoy a large measure of social and political autonomy. The people's participation in the governance was possible because even the regional and local government agencies had to depend on the cooperation of the people to carry on its activities.

Important issues were discussed in the community meetings and if necessary petitions were sent by the community to the regional or central governments through their headman. If the government officials commits excess of power, misuse of authority or persisted in harassing the people, the Tibetans were quite capable of protesting and resisting and even resort to complain against the erring officials to the government at Lhasa or appeal directly to the Dalai Lama<sup>18</sup>.

Democratic element is also reflected in the National Assembly which was regarded as representing the whole nation. Although its members were not elected through popular election, its members represented different occupations and classes. Its views were taken into account by the government while making major decisions.

Although, people voluntarily accepted the government authority, they had never acquiesced timidly to everything that was done by the government. The public opinion expected strict observance of customs and traditions; officials were expected not to transgress the bounds of their authority. As there was no newspapers nor broadcasting system nor other means of expressions, the people developed typical Tibetan ways to express their opinion through street songs and postures (yiggyur). These were the popular medium of expression of the public opinion. Through these medium of expression, people's grievances and protests became known not only in the whole community but also taken note of by the government authorities.

Traditional Tibetan society was, by no means, perfect and need for reforms were felt by some of the relatively young energetic officials. They realized the vast political changes outside Tibet and perceived the danger posed by

Tibet from China. These officials were of the opinion that unless they modernize the military and change socio-political system, it would be difficult for Tibet to face the challenge and safeguard its independence. The modernist movement was inspired and supported by both the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Dalai Lamas. Under the guidance of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the military modernization was planned and promoted with a clear grasp of the needs for training, equipment and a financial basis. English schools were opened in Gyantse and Lhasa. A small police force was formed. A few Tibetans were sent abroad for technical studies. Although the modernist movement was neither strong nor widespread, in due course of time it could have developed in Tibet the political, economic and military infrastructure of a reasonably modern state. However, direction of socio-political developments in Tibet was reversed as conservative officials as well as monastic segment out maneuvered the modernist group. They saw in the modernist movement a shift to secularism and diffusion of alien ideas which would harm Buddhism and disrupt the traditional power balance in Tibet<sup>19</sup>.

When the Fourteenth Dalai Lama assumed full authority of the government in November 1950, he did not take long to realise the need for reform and change in the society. He attempted to introduce far-reaching administrative and land reforms. He created a special reform committee and authorized it to hear and redress complaints by individuals against the district or local authorities. He approved the proposal for debt exemption submitted by the committee. A law was made against the demanding of free transport by officials and the rate of interest charged by money-lenders was limited. He was also thinking of introducing modernization in the field of education and communication. However, due to the determined Chinese opposition, who had already occupied the country, these reforms could not be implemented<sup>20</sup>. The Chinese had no intention of allowing the Tibetan Government to usurp their self-styled role as saviours of the working class.

The above discussion shows that different means were used at different phases of history to legitimize the authorities in Tibet. Since the thirteenth century, religious belief played a major role in acquiring the legitimacy. Not only the cultural foundation of the Tibetan society was laid by the religion but it also brought into existence a unique political system in which religious and secular affairs were intricately intertwined. It was not a static system but rather it was gradually evolving according to the changing need of time. There were also forces within the society which felt the need of modernization and change in the existing system. If Tibet were left to itself, it would have evolved into a modern nation-state competent to play its role in the comity of nations.





## FOOTNOTES

1. H.E. Richardson, "The Origin of the Tibetan Kingdom" in Bulletin of Tibetology. no. 1, 1989, p.5.
2. Dawa Norbu, "Changing Notions of Authority and Shifting Basis of Power and Their Combined Impact on Political Development in Tibet 600- 1950", unpublished paper prepared for the Ninth Wisconsin Conference on South Asia, November 7-9, 1980 held at Madison, pp. 7-22.
3. H.E. Richardson, Tibet and its History (Boston, 1984), p.29; Charles Bell, Tibet: Past and Present (Oxford, 1968), p.28. Chinese source confirm the great military strength and the aggressive military campaign of the Tibetans both against China and India. One Chinese author says that some time about 787 A.D. the Emperor of China made an alliance with the Caliph of Baghdad and some Indian Princes for security against the Tibetan. See R.C. Majumdar and A.D. Pusalkar, The History and Culture of the Indian People: Age of Imperial Kanauj (Bombay, 1955), p.445.
4. For detail see Sarat Chandra Das, The Religion and History of Tibet (New Delhi, 1988), pp. 33-34.
5. Richardson (1984) p.3; Helmut Haffmann, The Religion of Tibet (London, 1961), pp. 66-83.
6. Chos-byung means history of religion. The authors of Chos-byung and other Lama scholars had written the ancient Tibetan history in the light of Buddhism and in terms of Buddhist logic during the Buddhist renaissance. The myth of Choegyal is an intellectual legacy of this period. For detail see Dawa Norbu (1980), pp. 1-7.
7. Dawa Norbu, "Some Objective Conditions for Cultural Creativity in Medieval Tibet", The Tibet Journal, vol.x, no.4, Winter 1985, pp. 47-48.
8. Dawa Norbu (1980), pp. 22-27.
9. Cited in Dawa Norbu (1980), p. 36.
10. Tsepon W.D. Shakapa, "The rise of Changchub Gyaltzen and the Phagmo Drupa Period", Bulletin of Tibetology. no. 1, 1981, pp.23-30; Richardson (1984), p. 35.
11. The Karmapas were the first to use the Buddhist idea of reincarnation. For detail see Franz Michael, Rule by Incarnation (Colorado, 1982). See also Ram Rahul, The Government and Politics of Tibet (Delhi, (1969), pp. 5-21.
12. Dawa Norbu (1980), pp.47-50.
13. See Nirmal Chandra Sinha, Prolegomena to Lamaist Polity (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 5-21; See also Nirmal chandra Sinha "Chhos Sri Gnyi Lden", in Bulletin of Tibetology, vol.V, no.3, November 1968, pp. 13-20.
14. For detail of the Structure of the government see Franz Michael (1982), pp. 51-64.
15. Franz Michael (1982), pp. 116-119.
16. Franz Michael (1982), pp. 111-112.
17. Franz Michael (1982), pp. 48.
18. Franz Michael (1982), pp. 79-81.
19. Melvyn C. Golstein, A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951, (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 84-426; Michael Harris Goodman, The Last Dalai Lama A Biography (Boston, 1987), pp. 193-195.
20. Dalai Lama, Freedom in Exile (Delhi, 1990), pp. 85-85.