



CENJOWS

WEB ARTICLE  
WA/30/25

# **TIBET IN INDIA'S CHINA POLICY: STRATEGIC SILENCE OR MORAL RESPONSIBILITY?**

**MS SHARMISTHA PRATAP**

# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

### **Tibet in India's China Policy: Strategic Silence or Moral Responsibility?**



**Ms. Sharmistha Pratap** is a research intern at CENJOWS, New Delhi

### **Introduction**

The Tibet issue has always been a tricky part of India's relationship with China. It sits between India's sense of right and wrong and the need to be smart in global politics. In the 1950s, after China took control of Tibet, India gave shelter to the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan refugees.<sup>1</sup> At that time, India stood up for Tibet's freedom, which many countries respected. But over time, as China became more powerful and the world changed, India became more careful about what it says on the Tibet matter. To avoid any escalation of conflicts especially with the ongoing border issues and trade ties India now mostly stays quiet on the matter. Experts call this careful silence "strategic silence," meaning India chooses not to speak out too much to protect its own interests.<sup>11</sup>

Even though India mostly stays quiet on the Tibet issue, it still allows the Tibetan government-in-exile to live here and helps keep Tibetan culture alive. This shows that India still feels some moral responsibility, based on shared history and democratic values. This situation leads to important questions: Is India's policy on Tibet just a smart move to deal with China? Or does it also come from India's belief in what's right, which shows up now and then like after the 2020 Galwan clash with China? Balancing these two sides, being practical and staying true to values is one of the trickiest and least talked about parts of India's relationship with China today.

## **Historical Background**

Within the 1950s, India and China begun as inviting modern countries trusting to lead Asia, but their ties developed tense due to China's stresses around India's closeness with the Soviet Union and the Tibet issue, for which Prime Minister Nehru was afterward criticized for treating Tibet as a buffer state, not completely beneath China's control.<sup>III</sup> Be that as it may, after the 17 Point agreement was marked in May 1951 (invalidated by the Dalai Lama), Nehru chosen to become a close acquaintance with China at the cost of Tibet's authentic status as a de jure nation.<sup>IV</sup> By giving up Tibet's special status, India lost a strong moral stand, which hurt its image with smaller Asian countries and left it vulnerable especially during the 1962 war with China. Looking back, Nehru's practical approach may have delayed conflict, but it also cost India both its voice for Tibet and its influence over China in the years that followed.

Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to China, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in over three decades, helped ease tensions after the 1962 war and focused on resolving border issues rooted in earlier disagreements over Tibet.<sup>V</sup> During his 1988 visit, Rajiv Gandhi reaffirmed India's stand that Tibet is an autonomous region of China but as scholar Dawa Norbu points out, "while China continues to hint that Tibet is the basic problem as they did during Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China and Li Peng's to India, New Delhi continues to pretend that it has little to do with the territorial dispute".<sup>VI</sup> By agreeing that Tibet fully belongs to China, Rajiv Gandhi ended India's chance to act as a helper or supporter for Tibetan self-rule.

This helped start better talks on the border with China, but it also made it harder for India to speak up about human rights or freedom for Tibet. For China, Tibet stayed important both as part of its land and for safety reasons, while for India, Tibet became a quiet issue, only discussed in private, not in public.

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, India and China grew closer through trade deals, official visits, and joint talks under leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, but both sides avoided talking about Tibet in public so it wouldn't affect their growing relationship.<sup>VII</sup> In the 2010s and 2020s, India spoke out against projects like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which passes through Tibetan land, but still chose not to openly support Tibetan independence.<sup>VIII</sup> Instead, India quietly shared its concerns with China, trying to keep peace along the border while continuing to work together in other areas.

### **India's Strategic Heritage and Moral Imperative**

The Buddhist heritage of Tibet is a testament to its historical connection with India. The spread of Buddhism from India to Tibet and subsequent transformation of Tibetan society are somewhat well-known, but less apparent to the international community is the prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism across the Himalayan region of India, from Arunachal Pradesh in the east to Sikkim, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Ladakh to the northwest.<sup>IX</sup>

Indian policymakers have only recently come to terms with the strategic importance of Tibetan Buddhism and their stake in its future.<sup>X</sup> With rising tensions between India and China today, India supporting Tibetan Buddhist communities is a smart and much-needed step. By helping with education and better facilities in monasteries, India can build stronger local ties, protect its old cultural links with Tibet, and show its peaceful influence in ways China cannot easily copy. But this needs to be done carefully and by respecting the freedom of monks while adding useful lessons, and making sure spiritual goals are

not lost in political plans. If handled well, this approach could show how culture and security can work together in today's tricky world.

"India's position at that time (China's invasion of Tibet in 1950) was that the invasion was wrong. The matter should be settled peacefully. And Tibet has internal autonomy. Now, all this has been violated by China. So, China has violated the basis on which India and others formulated their policies. It is time to revisit the issue,"<sup>XI</sup> Ambassador Dilip Sinha says in book 'Imperial Games in Tibet: The Struggle for Statehood and Sovereignty'.

In his book, Ambassador Sinha demolishes the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) attempt to rewrite history by claiming Tibet was always part of China.<sup>XII</sup> "China now claims that even Chinggis Khan was Chinese, so they claim everything but, the Mongols were the first to rule over Tibet. Thereafter Tibet became independent. The Manchus conquered China in 1721 and when the Manchu dynasty collapsed in 1912, Tibet declared independence. Tibet was independent until 1950 when Communist China invaded."<sup>XIII</sup>

With rising border tensions, China's growing power, and India wanting to make its own strong decisions, it's the right time for India to rethink its stand on Tibet, as Sinha suggests. By speaking up about history, India can improve its global image and win support from Himalayan communities and countries that care about human rights. This could include more cultural and academic support for Tibet and quiet reminders in global meetings about Tibet's status before 1950. These steps would respect India's past role and also help strengthen its position along the northern border without causing big conflicts.

The Dalai Lama has often described India's stance on the Tibet issue as being 'too cautious'.<sup>XIV</sup> While it's clear that China is unwilling to address the Tibet issue, India's slow and cautious support raises concerns, not only about its worries over how China might respond to separatist movements in places like the Northeast and Kashmir, but also about how a possible peace deal between China and Tibet could impact India's own unresolved border problems with China.<sup>XV</sup> If China and Tibet officially solve their problems and give

Tibet real freedom, then China might feel free to push its border claims against India without any pressure. Also, because India wants to focus on building its economy, working on big projects like BRICS, and keeping good overall ties with China, it has chosen to talk about Tibet quietly in private instead of raising the issue in public.

India's constant carefulness about Tibet may no longer help in the long run. By ignoring Tibet, India loses both its moral voice and a chance to grow stronger culturally and in terms of security in the Himalayan region. A better plan would be to quietly talk about Tibet with China while also actively supporting Tibetan schools, culture, and heritage like helping monks' study, funding cultural work in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, and bringing up Tibet in global meetings through human rights and environment topics. This smart and balanced method would remind China that Tibet still matters to India, without creating open fights.

### **Role of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)**

The Central Tibetan Administration, started by the Dalai Lama in April 1959 and moved from Mussoorie to Dharamshala in May 1960 acts as the government-in-exile of Tibet, it works to protect Tibetan culture, take care of Tibetan refugees in India, and speak up for Tibetan rights around the world.<sup>xvi</sup> Operating from McLeod Ganj, also called "Little Lhasa," the CTA has set up a democratic system with its own parliament-in-exile, it provides schools, hospitals, and other help in about 35 Tibetan settlements in India and in other countries, Tibetan Welfare Offices work like unofficial embassies to talk to foreign governments and international groups for support.<sup>xvii</sup> By supporting Tibetan culture through schools, monasteries, and cultural programs, India strengthens its presence in border areas like Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Ladakh. This helps India push back against China's attempts to control the story in these regions. By letting Tibetan leaders speak freely in India, the world's attention stays on how China treats Tibet. This helps India show that it stands for human rights and democracy, which improves its reputation globally. As India gives thoughtful and limited support to the CTA, the latter keeps its

options open. It can increase or reduce its help depending on the situation with China, using the Tibet issue as a peaceful tool in future talks.

The five-year Central Tibetan Administration Capacity Building and Sustainability Initiative (CTA-CBI) is a 5-year project funded by the USAID mission in India designed to strengthen the organizational capacity of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in order to be more effective and sustainable in delivering services to Tibetans and achieving community self-reliance.<sup>xviii</sup> The project has two key objectives:

1. Strengthened Central Tibetan Administration Leadership and Planning<sup>xix</sup>
2. Improved Management Systems of CTA and Settlement Institutions<sup>xx</sup>

India should think about adding its own support to international aid. For example, it could offer scholarships for Tibetan monks, work together on studying the Himalayan glaciers, and give money to improve health centers in Tibetan settlements. If done respectfully and without controlling the CTA's freedom, this will show India's long-term interest in Tibet's future and keep its Himalayan borders strong—without causing major problems with China.

## **Conclusion**

India's policy on Tibet has always tried to balance between being practical and staying true to its values. The fact that India has always tried to keep its focus on maintaining its peace and economic ties with China and avoided to openly address Tibet's independence was mainly because of Prime Minister Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi's agreement with China in the past that Tibet was under China's control. But China cannot easily erase India's connection with Tibet as India has given the Dalai Lama and CTA a home in Dharamshala. India can start to speak about the Tibet issue in international meetings in a calm and peaceful way and start to vocally support Tibet's freedom and independence without

hampering its relationship with China. India's approach should be smart and balanced without escalating conflicts in its borders.

---

<sup>I</sup> Ashique. (2025, February 20). Escape to exile: The Dalai lama's journey to India. ChaloHoppo. <https://chalohoppo.com/escape-to-exile-the-dalai-lamas-journey-to-india/>

<sup>II</sup> GARVER, JOHN W. Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century. University of Washington Press, 2001. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnwcq>.

<sup>III</sup> Lhadon, T. (2023, May 2). Recentering Tibet in India's approach to China. Tibet Policy Institute. <https://tibetpolicy.net/recentering-tibet-in-indias-approach-to-china/>

<sup>IV</sup> Ibid

<sup>V</sup> Tsering, D. (2023, May 3). Recentering Tibet in India's approach to China - central Tibetan administration. Central Tibetan Administration - Restoring Freedom for Tibetans. <https://tibet.net/recentering-tibet-in-indias-approach-to-china/>

<sup>VI</sup> Ibid

<sup>VII</sup> India Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (n.d.). [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2675\\_665437/2711\\_663426/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2711_663426/)

<sup>VIII</sup> Ibid

<sup>IX</sup> International Campaign for Tibet. (2023, September 8). India should formalize a holistic approach to its Tibet policy. <https://savetibet.org/india-should-formalize-a-holistic-approach-to-its-tibet-policy/>

<sup>X</sup> Ibid

<sup>XI</sup> Sinha, D. (2024). Imperial games in Tibet: The struggle for statehood and sovereignty. Macmillan.

<sup>XII</sup> Revi, A. P. (2024, July 7). "India should revise Tibet Policy on China occupation, make stance clear on Dalai Lama's succession." StratNews Global. <https://stratnewsglobal.com/india/india-should-revise-tibet-policy-on-china-occupation-make-stance-clear-on-dalai-lamas-succession-us-xi-jinping/>

<sup>XIII</sup> Ibid



---

<sup>XIV</sup> TwoCircles.net. (2008, March 26). India's cautious approach on Tibet understandable: Dalai Lama.

[https://twocircles.net/2008mar26/indias\\_cautious\\_approach\\_tibet\\_understandable\\_dalai\\_lama.html](https://twocircles.net/2008mar26/indias_cautious_approach_tibet_understandable_dalai_lama.html)

<sup>XV</sup> (PDF) charting the Tibet issue in the Sino-Indian border dispute. (n.d.-m).

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241644832\\_Charting\\_the\\_Tibet\\_Issue\\_in\\_the\\_Sino-Indian\\_Border\\_Dispute](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241644832_Charting_the_Tibet_Issue_in_the_Sino-Indian_Border_Dispute)

<sup>XVI</sup> About CTA - central Tibetan administration. Central Tibetan Administration - Restoring Freedom for Tibetans. (2024, August 16). <https://tibet.net/about-cta/>

<sup>XVII</sup> Rigzin, T. D. and T. (2024, February 8). South Asia's Tibetan refugee community is shrinking, imperiling its long-term future. migrationpolicy.org.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/tibetan-refugees-india>

<sup>XVIII</sup> USAID/India Central Tibetan Administration Capacity Building and sustainability initiative (CTA-CBSI). icma.org. (n.d.). <https://icma.org/programs-and-projects/usaaid-india-central-tibetan-administration-capacity-building-and-sustainability-initiative-cta-cbsi>

<sup>XIX</sup> Ibid

<sup>XX</sup> Ibid