

# **The Succession of Dalai Lama**

## **Colonel Shailender Arya@**

### **Introduction**

Athrone awaits the return of the 14th Dalai Lama at his summer residence at Nechung, Tibet. Whether the Dalai Lama will return to reclaim Lhasa or not is a difficult question to answer as today even his images are banned in Tibet. But as Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama turned eighty in 2015, questions about his succession stare at Tibetans and the international community. The Dalai Lama is the most important figure in Tibetan Buddhism as he combines the undisputed spiritual and the temporal authority, a unique system not present anywhere else with the exception of the tiny Vatican City. The Oxford Dictionary defines him as ‘The spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism and, until the establishment of Chinese communist rule, the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet. Each Dalai Lama is believed to be the reincarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, reappearing in a child when the incumbent Dalai Lama dies’. The question of his succession is equally significant to the Chinese as it may decide the future of Tibetan independence movement and its direction. To India; the birthplace of Buddhism, the current residence of the Dalai Lama and the refuge of 1.2 lakh Tibetan community including the Tibetan government-in-exile; the importance of this question cannot be overstated.

### **Importance of Dalai Lama**

The Dalai Lama is considered as a ‘living god’ by six million Tibetan people. The Tibetan Buddhists believe that each Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of his predecessors who, in turn, are the manifestations of Avalokiteshvara, the patron saint of Tibet and Bodhisattva of Compassion. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who consciously choose to be reborn in order to help others achieve enlightenment. The current Dalai Lama is the 14th in history with the first Dalai Lama being born in 1391. Perhaps none has held the position with as much popularity and esteem as the current Dalai Lama and therefore despite having fled over the Himalayas to exile in India in 1959, he remains highly popular in his homeland. Post 2008 Beijing Olympics, as the restrictions on Tibetan faith and culture have intensified, more than 130 Tibetans have immolated themselves to protest Chinese rule over the high plateau. In many cases, they have used their final words to express devotion to the Dalai Lama.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from his position as the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama plays a major role as the political voice of the Tibetan people, who have suffered decades of conflict with the Chinese government.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in spite of his non-violent stance, he retains his status as the focal point of Free Tibet movement. He has single-handedly transformed a broken movement-in-exile in 1959 to one recognised by the world as having legitimate aspirations.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, there are increased calls and pleas for the Dalai Lama to reincarnate for the sake of Tibet’s future. In addition, there are now 400 million Chinese Buddhists including in inner military circles that may one day tilt the balance in his favour. Incidentally, the mother of President Xi Jinping is also a devout Buddhist. Beijing is now seeking to control Tibet by getting involved in the reincarnation selection process, making the next succession of Dalai Lama a highly political issue.

### **High Reincarnations in Tibet**

Traditionally, it has been the responsibility of the High Lamas of the Gelugpa tradition (Yellow Hat Sect) and the Tibetan government to find reincarnation. Upon the death of the Dalai Lama and consultation with the Nechung Oracle, a search for the Lama’s yangsi, or reincarnation, is conducted. High Lamas often visit Lhamo La-tso, a lake in central Tibet, and watch for a sign from the lake itself. This may be either a vision or some indication of the direction in which to search, and this was how the present Dalai Lama was found. High Lamas may also have a vision by a dream or if the Dalai Lama was cremated, they will often monitor the direction of the smoke as an indication of the direction of the rebirth. Once the High Lamas have found the home and the boy they believe to be the reincarnation, the boy undergoes a battery of tests to affirm the rebirth.<sup>4</sup> The process can take around two or three years. The tradition also stipulates that when the Dalai Lama dies, the duty falls on the Panchen Lama to find his new reincarnation, and in turn a new Panchen Lama has to be recognised by the Dalai Lama.

### **The Chinese Stand**

While the Dalai Lama turned a venerable eighty in 2015, the year also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region by the Chinese communist regime. The region is still a major flash point and resistance simmers under the surface even as high speed trains criss-cross the roof of the world. Therefore, the Nobel peace prize laureate Dalai Lama is seen as a potent threat by the Chinese government. Unsurprisingly, he has been described by Chinese Government officials as a “wolf in monk’s robes,” and a “dangerous splittist” intent on cleaving the Chinese nation. Beijing often orchestrates protests against the Dalai Lama during his travels abroad by Shugden worshippers and groups of ‘nationalist’ Chinese students. Beijing is also steadily increasing diplomatic and economic pressure on foreign governments to refrain from meeting the Dalai Lama.

China has now claimed the power to approve the naming of ‘high’ reincarnations in Tibet, based on a precedent set by the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing Dynasty. These ‘high’ reincarnations are mainly the Dalai and the Panchen Lama. The issue of reincarnation of Tibetan lamas became politicised when in 2007 China’s State of Religious Affairs Bureau issued its Decree No.5, ruling that reincarnations of all tulkus or living Buddhas, were only valid once approved by the state. Perhaps Chinese bureaucrats believed the decree would ensure that something like the controversial succession of the Panchen Lama in 1989 could not reoccur.<sup>5</sup>

To be fair to the Chinese, the religious affairs have always had state patronage in China. During the imperial

period, all Taoist deities had to be officially recognised by the emperor. For example, an imperial decree of the Song Dynasty in 1281 conferred upon the sea goddess Mazu, popular within the Chinese Diaspora, the official title of Tianfei (Heavenly Princess). Under the Qing Dynasty, four centuries later, Emperor Qianlong elevated the goddess to the rank of Tianhou (Empress of Heaven).<sup>6</sup> However, to extend the strictly Chinese precedence to remote Tibet is devoid of any logic and hints at potential manipulations. Meanwhile, Chinese president Xi Jinping has asked officials to alter school curriculum of Tibetan children in order to incorporate ‘core socialist values’. This is part of China’s preparations to bring about major changes in the thinking of the next generation of Tibetans. The Communist Party sees the Dalai Lama as a major obstacle in enforcing its idea of a socialist society among Tibetans.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese have been repeating their newly-discovered stance. In March 2015, on the sidelines of China’s annual parliamentary session, Zhu Weiqun, head of an influential ethnic-and-religious-affairs committee, insisted that it was the Chinese government’s responsibility to designate the Dalai Lama’s successor. Again in July 2015, China claimed that it has a vital role in the succession as it had officially conferred the title of 5th Dalai Lama in 1653. However, there have been dissenting voices within China. Professor Jin Wei, Deputy Director of Minority Issues in the Central Party School in Beijing, in an interview published on 6 June 2013, by the Hong Kong-based Chinese language magazine ‘Yazhou Zhoukan’ (Asia Weekly), asserted that China must ensure that the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation is found “inside China” and China must “make every possible effort to avoid the embarrassment of the ‘twin Panchen Lama’ event”.

The thirteenth White Paper on Tibet was issued on 14 April 2015 by China’s State Council Information Office. It emphasises that “Tibet has been an integral part of China since ancient times, and has never been an independent nation”, it insists: “Only when he (Dalai Lama) makes a public statement acknowledging that Tibet has been an integral part of China since antiquity, and abandons his stance on independence and his attempts to divide China, can he improve his relationship with the central government in any real sense.” In response to China’s White Paper on Tibet, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) at Dharamshala prepared a 31-page report which claimed that China wants to grab Tibet’s institution of the Dalai Lama due to its past geopolitical importance in the volatile politics of China, Mongolia and Tibet. According to CTA, China’s internal assessment that it cannot rule Tibet forever without the legitimising influence of Dalai Lama over the Tibetan people is also behind the move.<sup>8</sup>

## **A Missing Lama**

Panchen Lama is the second highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism. He heads the powerful Tashilhunpo Monastery and his name ‘Panchen’ means the ‘Great Scholar’, a title given by the 5th Dalai Lama. 2015 marked the 20th anniversary of the disappearance of the real Panchen Lama, Gendun Choekyi Nyima, whose fate remains of deep concern to many Tibetans. In 1989, the 10th Panchen Lama died suddenly in Shigatse, at the age of 51, shortly after giving a speech critical of the Chinese occupation. In 1995, the Dalai Lama named a boy in Tibet, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, as the reincarnation of the previous Panchen Lama. But the Chinese placed that boy under house arrest and installed another, Gyancain Norbu, in his place. Amnesty International declared him to be the world’s youngest political prisoner. Today, while China insists that Gyancain Norbu is the legitimate Panchen Lama, the Tibetan Buddhists do not recognise him and in fact spurn the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama, referring him as the ‘Panchen Zuma’ meaning ‘fake Panchen Lama’.

## **Views of Dalai Lama**

The Dalai Lama has put forward frank views on his succession. Perhaps he will choose his successor during his lifetime, contrary to the usual tradition of identifying the new Dalai Lama only after the death of the old one. Maybe his soul will transfer to a person outside of Tibet. Or perhaps, he has said most recently, the line of Dalai Lamas will end with him, if that is the wish of the Tibetan people.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1970s; the Dalai Lama first told a Polish newspaper that he thought he would be the last Dalai Lama. These statements caused a furore amongst Tibetans in India. Many could not believe that such an option could even be considered. It was further felt that it was not the Dalai Lama’s decision to reincarnate.<sup>10</sup>

Following the Chinese decree, the Dalai Lama in 2007 publicly suggested that he might not want to reincarnate. Later on, he told author Matteo Pistono that he would “be reborn outside of China’s control”. In 2011, after giving up his formal political role within the Tibetan exile Government, he opined that the succession should not be used for political ends. “Bear in mind that, apart from the reincarnation recognised through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People’s Republic of China,” he said.<sup>11</sup> In 2013, the Dalai Lama said that he would not be opposed to a woman successor - and even thought it could be the better option for Tibet. “I think it would be good,” the Dalai Lama told an interviewer with the UK’s Channel 4 News. “Now we are in the 21st century... Females have more potential regarding the promotion of human compassion.”

Again in an interview with a German newspaper in 2014, Welt am Sonntag, the Dalai Lama underscored his belief that the tradition of the post he holds could end with him. He said Tibetan Buddhism was not dependent on a single person and is characterised by a substantial network of lamas and monks who nurture spiritual education in the community. “Tibetan Buddhism is not dependent on one individual. We have a very good organisational structure with highly trained monks and scholars.”<sup>12</sup> This was contested by China. A spokesman for China’s Foreign Ministry, Hua Chunying told reporters that China had a “set religious procedure and historic custom” when it came to the reincarnation of living Buddhist lamas, including the position of Dalai Lama. “The title of Dalai Lama is conferred by the central government, which has hundreds of years of history.”

Fresh speculation was again sparked by the Dalai Lama’s interview on BBC’s Newsnight programme on 17 Dec 2014, where he commented that he may not have a successor. BBC quoted “The Dalai Lama institution will cease one day. These man-made institutions will cease. .... So, much better that a centuries-old tradition should cease at the time of a quite popular Dalai Lama.” Ganden Thurman, Executive Director of Tibet House US, has analysed that by denying

the need for a successor, the Dalai Lama may also be charting a course for a more democratic Tibet moving forward. The Tibetan government had, in the past, looked to the Dalai Lama to make most political decisions. But if Tibet is to flourish beyond the life of its prominent leader, a more democratic system may be needed.<sup>13</sup>

The New York Times reported that the Dalai Lama again said in 2015 that China did not have the right to choose his successor - contrary to government claims - and that in fact he might not be reborn at all. This statement led Padma Choling, the autonomous region's Chinese-appointed governor, accusing the Dalai Lama of blasphemy for suggesting as much and reiterated that Beijing has the right to choose. However, the most likely possibility is that a successor may be chosen from Tibetan diaspora outside Tibet, as profoundly foretold by the Dalai Lama; If I die in the near future, and the Tibetan people want another reincarnation, a fifteenth Dalai Lama, while we are still outside Tibet, my reincarnation will definitely appear outside Tibet. Because the very purpose of the incarnation is to fulfill the work that has been started by the previous life.<sup>14</sup> According to Robert D Kaplan, this could mean that "the next Dalai Lama might come from the Tibetan cultural belt that stretches across northern India, Nepal, and Bhutan, presumably making him even more pro-Indian and anti-Chinese".<sup>15</sup>

From a purely religious perspective, the lamas are able to determine firstly whether they are reborn, and if they are going to be reborn, where they will be reborn. Therefore, Chonpel Tsering, Dalai Lama's representative in northern Europe, stated "The present carnation, the present Dalai Lama, can decide. The rebirth is his choice." It is most likely that the Dalai Lama shall consult the Tibetan people and others that follow Tibetan Buddhism to find out whether they think that there should be a 15th Dalai Lama. Thereafter, if the decision is, 'Yes', then he will set out clear instructions about the process, so that there is no ambiguity, so that the reincarnation process is not manipulated or misused by anybody for their own personal or political interests.<sup>16</sup>

## **Tibetan and Indian Views**

Members of the Tibetan exile community have also disparaged the ruling Communist Party's insistence on dictating the Dalai Lama's afterlife. "It's like Fidel Castro saying, 'I will select the next Pope and all the Catholics should follow,'" Lobsang Sangay, the Tibetan Prime Minister in exile, told Reuters in March 2015. Tibetans fear that the Chinese government will use the issue of the Dalai Lama's succession to split Tibetan Buddhism, with one new Dalai Lama named by exiles and another one by the Chinese after his death. India is meanwhile giving increasing importance to the Dalai Lama. In July 2015, two central government ministers for the first time attended the function in Dharamsala in their official capacity. In Delhi, three former foreign secretaries spoke at a well-attended symposium on July 4, while the reception on July 6 evening was also attended by two central ministers.

While it is certain that the Chinese will put up their own candidate as their next successor, it is likely that the demands from the Tibetan community including the widespread diaspora shall lead to Tibetans nominating their reincarnation. In that case, according to Tibetan writer and activist Jamyang Norbu, the ideal place for the next Dalai Lama to be born is in the Himalayas on the Indian side of the border, where the people are ethnically Tibetan, where there are Tibetan Buddhists, and they are very loyal to the Dalai Lama, to the Tibetan spiritual world. Norbu further states that "So if he's born there, it would drag in the government of India. They would be obliged to protect him."<sup>17</sup> This will be an uncanny repeat of 1959 for India when the current Dalai Lama fled to India and Pandit Nehru granted him asylum. The Sino-India war soon followed in 1962.

### **Succession Dynamics**

The communist invasion of Tibet had the unintended side-effect of uniting all Tibetan lineages under the Dalai Lama. The various sects, lineages and diaspora groups are today more united than ever in the Tibetan history. In fact, many regard the personable young 17th Karmapa Lama, head of Buddhism's Karma Kagyu sect (the Black Hat sect with global headquarters at Rumtek, Sikkim) and representative of the world's oldest unbroken line of succession through reincarnation, as the Dalai Lama's natural heir.<sup>18</sup> He is 29 years old, an avid environmentalist and at 14 years had fled Tibet for India. The next Dalai Lama will also have a pivotal role to play in the selection of next Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama's approval of any settlement between CTA and China dealing with the future of Tibet is vital to make the deal legitimate and acceptable.

Independent analysts like Robert Barnett, director of the Modern Tibet Studies Programme at Columbia University in New York, believe that China wants a 'tame' lama and has invested huge resources into trying to find a tame lama. China is intent on avoiding a situation where there are rival, contending Dalai Lamas. On the other hand, the peace-loving Dalai Lama is reluctant for his succession as he is afraid that the succession issue and the holy institution itself may be politically oriented which is not what Buddhism is all about. His concern is also to ensure that China should be prevented from exerting more control over Tibetan Buddhism, which is possible if China is able to manipulate the succession results. In fact, it is a strange situation. The centuries old Tibetan Buddhism is open to drop this sacred religious institution if it is not possible to keep it away from Chinese manipulations. On the other hand, a communist China, with its 'religion is poison' atheist position and no belief in reincarnation is keen to keep the same - evidently for manipulation and strengthening their control over Tibet.

## **Conclusion**

The current Dalai Lama is a world-renowned figure of compassion, wisdom and patience. He is also an international celebrity - admired by influential people like Barack Obama, Richard Gere and Desmond Tutu. It is indeed strange that his reincarnation which is an esoteric concept that cannot be proved scientifically has become a key political issue in the Chinese-Tibetan context. The Dalai Lama was born in 1935 and has said that he hopes to live to be 113 years old. Let us hope that it is true, and by then the Tibetans may gain significant autonomy or political freedom from China so that they may welcome him back to his magnificent Potala palace at Lhasa. If not, we may remember that the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, was born in Tawang, 13th Dalai Lama Thupten Gyatso had exiled to Sikkim in India from 1910 to 1912 to escape a Chinese invasion and the 14th Dalai Lama had exiled to India in 1959 after an abortive

uprising against Chinese rule. India may as well be hosting the 15th Dalai Lama and their unique heritage for years.

## Endnotes

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- 8 Anand Bodh, 'China wants to grab institution of Dalai Lama: CTA', Times of India, September 7, 2015. See at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/China-wants-to-grab-institution-of-Dalai-Lama-CTA/articleshow/48852932.cms>
- 9 Hannah Beech, op cit.
- 10 Ardy Veraegen, The Dalai Lamas: The Institution and its History, DK Printworld, New Delhi, 2002, p.5.
- 11 Andrew Buncombe, 'Dalai Lama says he might not be born again', The Independent, September 11, 2014.
- 12 Antonia Blumberg, op cit.
- 13 Ibid.
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- 15 Robert D Kaplan, 'The Geography of Chinese Power', Foreign Affairs, May/June 2010 Issue.
- 16 Will the Dalai Lama reincarnate? BBC World Service, March 25, 2015. See at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-32032790>
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Sunanda K Datta-Ray, Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim, Tranquebar Press, New Delhi, 2013. p. xxii.

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