

# The Karmapa Story

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## Abstract

*The Karmapa heads the 900 years old Karma Kagyu sect, popularly called the Black Hat sect of the Tibetan Buddhism. He has significant following in India, particularly in Sikkim, as also in Bhutan, China and the West. He is the only high-ranking Tibetan Lama formally recognised both by Dalai Lama and the Chinese. The article outlines the importance of Karmapa in the current political and spiritual hierarchy of Tibetans, the recent controversies surrounding him, and the causes for his reluctance to return to India. This needs to be viewed in light of the recent changes in Chinese policy under Xi Jinping wherein China is making substantial efforts to become the new benefactor of Buddhism, manipulating affiliations and successions all along the Sino-Indian border. China now terms Buddhism an 'ancient Chinese religion'. Beijing has spent billions to revive the birthplace of Buddha, besides holding World Buddhist Forums since 2006. The role of Karmapa in countering the 'Sinification' of Buddhism cannot be overstated. Karmapa is an essential figure in the smooth succession of Dalai Lama and a very strong contender for a political successor of Dalai Lama, with implications on the Tibetan movement. Under these circumstances, it is imperative to get Karmapa back to India from United States (US) and seek his assistance in promoting Tibetan unity and be the next leader of Tibetan movement until the next incarnation of Dalai Lama attains adulthood. The article concludes that a Karmapa seat in exile in US shall be India's loss,*

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*besides exposing him to Chinese stratagems. India, with its soft-power credentials, cannot lose the spiritual plot over the Himalayas to China.*

## **Introduction**

2019 is a special year for the Tibetans. It was 60 years back, that in March 1959, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama fled Lhasa following the Tibetan uprising and crossed over into India. He was only 24 years old, enabling him to undertake this long and harsh journey over the Tibetan plateau. His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, shall turn 84 in July 2019 and the Tibetan community is actively looking for a spiritual and temporal successor. A probable successor is the Karmapa who shares many things common with the Dalai Lama, including the fact that he also fled from Tibet at a young age of 14 to India. In 1999, the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje escaped from the Chinese supervision in eastern Tibet to India and was welcomed at the Tibetan quarters at McLeod Ganj in Himachal Pradesh on January 5, 2000 along with his sister. The Karmapa has another unique distinction. In this era of the Dalai Lama labelled as “splittist in a monk’s robes” by the Chinese, and a fake Panchen Lama propped up by Beijing while the real Panchen Lama remains a political prisoner, the Karmapa is the only high-ranking Tibetan official recognised by China. Thus, his role and future is deeply linked to the future of the Tibetan movement and the way the succession of Dalai Lama shall pan out on both sides of the Himalayas.

## **The Chinese Rethink**

While the Tibetan movement is seeking a way ahead in the face of growing Chinese economic and military clout, under Xi Jinping there has been a quiet rethink on Buddhism. From the days of destruction of Buddhist monasteries during the Cultural Revolution, China is now making substantial efforts to become the new benefactor of Buddhism. Xi has an old Tibet connect. As Secretary General of the State Council, Xi’s father, Xi Zhongxun, had overseen the last visits of the 19-year-old Dalai Lama and of the Panchen Lama to Beijing, and reportedly wore the watch the Tibetan spiritual leader had given him into his old age.<sup>1</sup> For Beijing, the aim of promoting Buddhism is to harness the religion for soft power across Asia. Another unstated aim is to promote Buddhist leaders who are aligned to the Chinese policies. China now calls Buddhism an

‘ancient Chinese religion’ and has spent US \$ 3 billion to revive the birthplace of the Buddha, the Nepalese town of Lumbini. It has been holding World Buddhist Forums since 2006 with monks from all over the world. China is pouring in money to revive the Gandhara trail of Buddhist sites in Pakistan, linking heritage revival to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>2</sup> The Chinese government is refurbishing selected monasteries in Tibet and providing money for their upkeep, including the Karmapa’s original seat at the Tsurphu Monastery, located 70 km from Lhasa.

The China watchers are calling this development as the ‘**Sinification**’ of *Buddhism*. In 2016, the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau launched what Xinhua called ‘an online system to check the authenticity of living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism’, to control the succession of the lamas.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese claim on being patrons of Buddhism ring hollow due to their suppression of the Tibetans and the massive environmental degradation of Tibet. However, few voices can resist the massive doles that the Chinese are offering, and in few years, China may indeed be perceived as a leading benefactor of Buddhism, with anybody opposing portrayed as a divisive figure. Within China, the Sinification threat is real. In January 2019, China announced a five-year plan to ‘**Sinicize**’ Buddhism for practitioners inside its borders.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Importance of Karmapa**

The Chinese ingress in all matters Tibetan brings us back to the pivotal role of Karmapa. The Karmapa, now 34 year old, heads the 900 years old Karma Kagyu sect, popularly called the Black Hat sect, of the Vajrayana Buddhism. Kagyu means transmitted command, and it is a powerful sect. It is also the second largest Tibetan sect after the largest Gelukpa or the Yellow Hat sect, headed by the Dalai Lama. Therefore, Karmapa cannot as such succeed Dalai Lama as they are from different sects. The Karmapa has, however, the potential to become a political successor and the global representative of the Tibetan Buddhism. His reincarnation as Karmapa has been recognised by China, the first time since 1959 that a reincarnated high lama has been formally acknowledged.<sup>5</sup> He is possibly the only high-ranking Tibetan Lama recognised both, by the Dalai Lama and by the Chinese. While Karmapa is considered to be second only to the Dalai Lama in the religious hierarchy, his position is unique in the context of Bhutan

because he happens to be the spiritual patron of Bhutan, especially that of the Bhutanese royal family. Besides Bhutan, the Karmapa also holds great influence along the entire 4,000 kilometres long Himalayan border belt of India, from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh, especially in Sikkim.<sup>6</sup> The Karmapa also has a following among the Chinese Buddhists.

While Tibetan Buddhism has four sects and many sub-sects, there is enormous significance of the Karmapa-led Karma Kagyu lineage. It is the most ancient *tulku* (a reincarnated lama) lineage predating the Dalai Lama lineage by more than two centuries. The Kagyu lineage had begun the selection of its head through reincarnation, much before other sects adopted it. The Kagyus have thrived in France, and have more centres (over 100) in the West than any of the other schools.<sup>7</sup> After recognition by the Dalai Lama in July 1992, Ogyen Trinley Dorje has been recognised as Karmapa by nearly 95 per cent of the Karma Kagyu lineage. The key teachers of the lineage, mainly the 7<sup>th</sup> Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, the 9<sup>th</sup> Thrangu Rinpoche, the 7<sup>th</sup> Mingyur Rinpoche, and the 9<sup>th</sup> Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche have recognised him. The Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamshala also recognises him as the Karmapa. He has made common cause with the Tibetan struggle against Chinese occupation and professed his loyalty to the Dalai Lama.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of Karmapa was evident when the organisers, the Dharamshala-based Department of Religion and Culture, 'indefinitely' postponed an important meeting scheduled to discuss the future of the Dalai Lama's institution. The reason given for the 'indefinite' postponement of the 13<sup>th</sup> Religious Conference of the Schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon Tradition, which was to be held from November 29 to December 1, 2018, was the sudden demise of the head of the Nyingma School, Kathok Getse Rinpoche in Nepal. However, many, including the Tibetologist Claude Arpi, believe that the absence of the Karmapa was the real reason, as he was unable to get an Indian visa.

### **The Karmapa Controversies**

The Karmapa has been weakened by controversies. The first controversy is about a counter-claimant. Post the demise of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, who had taken refuge in Sikkim after the 1959 Tibet uprising, there was a split over his

succession. While two regents, Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche recognised the Tibet-born Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the fourth regent, Shamar Rinpoche, opposed their choice and selected his own reincarnation, Thaye Trinley Dorje. The Chinese sided with the Tibet-born Ogyen Trinley and in September 1992, he was enthroned in Tsurphu, the main Karma Kagyu monastery in Tibet by Ren Wuzhi, Head of the Religious Affairs Bureau of China's State Council and the two regents supporting him.<sup>9</sup> In India, the main Karma Kagyu monastery is the Rumtek monastery in Sikkim. It was the seat of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa in exile. However, the counter claim has prevented the enthroning of the Karmapa at Rumtek monastery. This led to the young Karmapa, post his arrival from Tibet, to live in Gyuto monastery near Dharamshala and not occupy the exile seat at Rumtek due to fears of a dispute. Meanwhile the other claimant, Thaye Trinley Dorje has married in March 2017 and lost support among the Tibetans, leaving the field open for Ogyen Trinley as the undisputed Karmapa. They also had a reconciliation meeting in rural France in October 2018.

Notwithstanding Ogyen Trinley's great escape from Tibet, the Karmapa was in another controversy in February 2011 with the Himachal government wherein nearly one million US \$ was found in his monastery, some of it in Chinese Yuan. This issue was later cleared as being legitimate donations. The third controversy is about his rather longish stay outside India. It was only after 15 years after his escape to India in 2000 that he was allowed to travel abroad in 2015, mainly because it was considered too easy an escape, hinting at a larger Chinese plot. Karmapa is currently in the US, in New Jersey's Wharton State Forest area, where he had gone via Europe on a three-month visa in May 2017 on the strength of his Indian Identity-Certificate (IC). The IC works as a Tibetan refugee's Indian passport and travel document including for the Dalai Lama who travels around the globe on a similar Indian IC.

The Karmapa has since obtained a passport of Commonwealth of Dominica, a tiny island in Caribbean Sea, which has not gone down well in India. The people around the Karmapa were reported to have said that he was unhappy because of being kept under constant watch of the security agencies and being made to seek permission whenever he wanted to travel outside Dharamshala. The Karmapa was also not happy in the Gyuto

monastery which is a monastery of the Gelugpa sect wherein he cannot perform his religious ceremonies according to the traditions of his Karma Kagyu sect. Meanwhile the Chinese have been careful not to criticise him, in spite of his flight to India. The Chinese were unfazed by his flight and claimed that had gone to India just to collect the 'sacred black hat' from Rumtek, which was left by his predecessor.<sup>10</sup> Resultantly, in 2000, many in the Indian media had termed him as a Chinese spy.

### **The Succession Methods**

The larger question facing the Tibetan community is the usefulness of the reincarnation model in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This model leaves a large gap, ranging between 10-20 years, without a head lama. Historically, the instability of the system has often been demonstrated wherein it was used by incompetent stewards, regents or by the Chinese Ambans, the representative of the Manchu emperor, to influence the Tibetan politics.<sup>11</sup> The manipulation rewards were massive as the political and the spiritual powers were merged in the hands of one person, the Dalai Lama. This reincarnation model can no longer function effectively and there is a need to make clear distinction in successions.

Whether it is the Dalai Lama or the Karmapa, it shall be prudent to elect or nominate a successor in the lifetime of the previous head lama. If the Tibetans wish to adopt a democratic succession process, the other person who can become the political successor is the democratically elected Prime Minister of the Central Tibetan Administration, Lobsang Sangay. In case of the Dalai Lama, either the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa or an elected representative like Lobsang Sangay can be nominated as the political successor. As regards a spiritual successor, it shall be apt to adopt an emanation in an already-born boy or adolescent, thus preventing any sectarian disputes or China taking advantage of the situation by 'discovering' their own indoctrinated Dalai Lama who shall then be a Tibetan poster boy of the virtues of Communist Party of China.

### **Way Ahead**

The popularity of the Karmapa can be seen at the Kagyu Monlam Chemno, a major prayer gathering held in Bodhgaya every year-end. The sect is spread over the globe, resulting in major influence



among the Tibetan diaspora. They have regional monastic seats at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra in New York and Dhagpo Kagyu Ling in Dordogne, France. The Karmapa holds high chances to be the next leader of the Tibetan movement until the next incarnation of Dalai Lama attains adulthood. India's support to the Karmapa is crucial for preventing the Chinese playing reincarnation games all along the Tibetan border. In the post-Dalai Lama phase, Tibetans from across the world will be looking to the Karmapa for guidance and leadership, being the only undisputed leader. India should encourage him to come back, provide access to the Rumtek monastery, and must not do anything that could deepen the Karmapa's apprehensions about his treatment in India. He should be allowed greater movement and international spiritual tours.

The Karma Kagyu sect may be given land on payment near Dwarka in Delhi to set up a monastery as proposed by them. Like his predecessor, who established the Rumtek monastery, the Karmapa is keen to build a replica of the Tsurphu monastery in India. It shall be a loss for India if the Karmapa becomes a US-based entity, far from Tibet, which shall reduce him to a minor media celebrity, with reduced influence in the Sino-Indian border areas. The US option may be attractive to him in view of restrictions in India. He already has an estate in Woodstock in New York State - Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Inc - that alone is worth millions of dollars.<sup>12</sup> He is being courted by the House of Representatives who have recently invited him to a function at the Capitol Visitor Centre by Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi and other Congresswomen. The farm estate of his current US stay is gifted to him by a Chinese-Taiwanese couple.<sup>13</sup> The American dream is indeed attractive.

### **Checkmating Chinese**

If India does not take ownership of the Karmapa issue, the Chinese will. They are already promoting China-friendly Tibetan sects and downplaying the Dalai Lama led Gelugpa sect and the Drukpa lineage (Red Hat sect), a key branch of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. The Chinese continue to deal with the heads of various Tibetan lineages in India and even facilitate the reincarnation of their successors in Tibet. In the event of the sad demise of the Dalai Lama, the Chinese shall prop up a fake Dalai Lama somewhere in Tibet, possibly the son of a party loyalist. To

complicate matters, this fake Dalai Lama shall be approved by the fake Panchen Lama Gyaincain Norbu as the real Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is in Chinese custody since the age of six, thus eternally confusing the Tibetans. In such an event, having an authentic Karmapa in India shall be a strong bet to counter the Chinese propaganda, and reduce credibility of the fake Dalai Lama appointed by them. The Karmapa hopes to return to India quickly, as stated in a recent video message.<sup>14</sup> He should be allowed to return to Rumtek, legal case notwithstanding, as he is now recognised as Karmapa by overwhelming numbers of followers. His return to India shall enable the conduct of the postponed 13<sup>th</sup> Religious Conference which is crucial in bringing together various streams of Tibetan Buddhism and their leaders. There can be no Tibetan unity without Karmapa.

With infrastructure build-up complete, Tibet is likely to witness a demographic inversion wherein a large population of Han Chinese, currently only restricted to larger cities in Tibet, shall move to smaller towns and villages encouraged by various incentives and tax-breaks. The Tibetans shall become minority in their own ancient land, and a minority everywhere, like the Jewish diaspora before the establishment of Israel. However, the diaspora shall remain connected. It is critical for India to ensure a clear succession to the Dalai Lama by Karmapa or any other consensus candidate, for it is the faith that unites the Tibetans in Tibet, the Tibetan refugees in India and the Tibetan diaspora across the globe. Towards that the continuity and stability of the Karmapa is important. While India may not have the spare capital to bankroll BRI like massive infrastructure projects across Asia and Africa, it can take lead in promoting constancy in Tibetan Buddhism. With 244 million Buddhists in China and Xi Jinping's wife, Peng Liyuan being a follower of Tibetan Buddhism, India, with its soft-power credentials, cannot lose the spiritual plot over the Himalayas to China. A Green Card and a Karmapa seat in exile in the US shall be India's loss. A return of Karmapa to the Land of Snow (Tibet) under the Chinese shall be simply devastating.

### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> *Krithika Varagur*, The Coming Fight for the Dalai Lama's Soul, Foreign Policy, January 22, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/22/dalai-lama-reincarnation-beijing-politics-tibet/>

<sup>3</sup> *Benjamin Penny*, Loc cit.

<sup>4</sup> *Lim Yan Liang*, China passes five-year plan to sinicise Islam, as Beijing tightens grip on major faiths in China, The Straits Times, January 9, 2019. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-passes-five-year-plan-to-sinicise-islam-as-beijing-tightens-grip-on-major>

<sup>5</sup> *Gill Farrer-Halls*, The World of Dalai Lama, Thorsons Publishers, London, 1998.p.125.

<sup>6</sup> *Vijay Kranti*, MEA gets aggressive on Karmapa, commits diplomatic blunder, Sunday Guardian, December 29, 2018. <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/mea-gets-aggressive-karmapa-commits-diplomatic-blunder>

<sup>7</sup> *Gill Farrer-Halls*, Loc cit.

<sup>8</sup> *Surya Gangadharan*, Why Are Karmapa And His Supporters Angry? January 16, 2019. <https://sniwire.com/china/why-are-karmapa-and-his-supporters-angry/>

<sup>9</sup> *Claude Arpi*, The Karmapa Controversy and The Dalai Lama's 'Return', December 13, 2018. <https://sniwire.com/the-karmapa-controversy-and-the-dalai-lamas-return/>

<sup>10</sup> *Phunchok Stobdan*, The Flight of the Karmapa is Further Proof That India Has No Tibet Card, The Wire, August 7, 2018. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/the-flight-of-the-karmapas-is-further-proof-that-india-has-no-tibet-card>

<sup>11</sup> *Claude Arpi*, Loc cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Lobsang Wangyal*, India's Karmapa conundrum, Tibet Sun, 30 August 2018. <https://www.tibetsun.com/opinions/2018/08/30/indias-karmapa-conundrum>

<sup>13</sup> *Phunchok Stobdan*, Loc cit.

<sup>14</sup> *Vijaita Singh, Suhasini Haidar*, Karmapa says India didn't issue to him, wants to return, The Hindu, January 24, 2019.