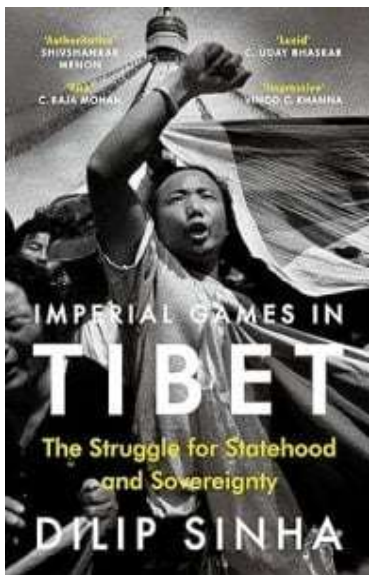




Book Review

Dilip Sinha, *Imperial Games in Tibet: The Struggle for Statehood and Sovereignty*, pp.287, Macmillan, 2024, Price ₹599



Dilip Sinha is a former diplomat with a rich sense of history. His book under review provides rare insights into the China-Tibet imbroglio. Quite evidently, his sympathies are with Tibet. The gist of the book may be summed up in his following observations: 'The lack of international support for Tibet, and the unquestioning acceptance of China's claim over it, represents a tragic chapter in modern history - one of the acknowledged failures of the UN'.

Researching the trail of events, he holds 'the Great Game', that is, the 19th century rivalry between Britain and Russia essentially responsible for this fait accompli. Instead of recognising Tibet as an independent sovereign country, these two rival imperial countries felt wiser to use its geographical territory as a buffer between the two under the suzerainty of a weak China.

On India's independence in 1947 and after the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, the situation was in 'a state of flux' for Tibet and she made efforts to be recognised as an independent sovereign country, especially so, from India and the US. Tibet, however, failed to get support of either of these two countries. China sent its army into Tibet in October 1950 and soon annexed Tibet by May 1951.

India's dilemma vis-a-vis the growing crisis in Tibet.

Chapter 10 of the book is indeed of great value for understanding India's dilemma over the growing crisis in Tibet. Meticulously researched, the author has brought to light some of the rare correspondences during this phase of India's diplomacy. One correspondence sent by India's Political Officer in Sikkim (Harishwar Dayal) to Government of India, in particular, stands out.

To quote Dayal's words, 'It seems desirable at this time.... to avoid making concessions to Chinese claims in advance and giving the impression that India is NOT concerned in what happens in Tibet' (pp.212). He furthermore cautioned the Government that 'after annexing Tibet, China might raise its old claims to Ladakh, Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan and tribal tracks of Assam as well as their own claim of suzerainty over Nepal' (pp.212).

The views of India's ambassador to China were, however, to trust the Chinese. The Government of India, on the other hand, felt necessary to weigh the ramifications of its support to Tibet internationally, and ultimately did not go beyond asking the Government of China to ensure Tibet's autonomy and advising China to resolve the situation peacefully.

Chinese mindset in the China-Tibet imbroglio

A reading of China's history shows that China suffered far more bloody wars, pillages, rapes and mass killings than most countries. It was accordingly observed, 'In the catalogue of nomadic and seminomadic peoples who menaced the settled regions of China's north, and west may seem inexhaustible.... To this list could be added later sea borne intruders - the European powers in the nineteenth century and Japanese imperialists in the twentieth' (Keay, John, 2008).

Even close to the Chinese Revolution in 1949, China reportedly lost nearly 20 million lives in the civil war consequent to the Taiping Uprisings over the period 1852 to 1864. (It coincided with the Sepoy Mutiny in India). This was followed by the Nanjing massacre by the imperial Japanese army in 1937 and later large-scale killings during 1927 to 1949 due to the civil war between the Kuomintang Nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party. Given such a past and the deep distrust of the Advanced West, China might have felt militarily threatened if Tibet was not under its control.

The Tibetan Empire

The author discusses the China-Tibet imbroglio in the backdrop of the thirteenth century. This is also reportedly the stand of the Government of China who argue that Tibet was part of Imperial China under the Mongols (1271 to 1368 CE). It might perhaps have been more rewarding if the author had gone back to six centuries earlier, that is, to the seventh century CE.

The seventh century CE is remarkable in many ways for world history and very significant especially for Asia. As it was observed, 'The great Tong Taizhong (in China, mine) belonged to a generation of Asian empire-builders..... Strong-brstan-sgam (in Tibet, mine), his contemporary was masterminding the first unification of the scattered peoples of Asia's high plateau to lay the foundations of a formidable **Tibetan empire**. Across the Himalayas in the Gangetic plane Harshvardhan in Kannauj was performing a similar feat in establishing his imperial sway over north India.....And in the far southwest, along the caravan routes of Arabia, another contemporary took rejection in Mecca as cause for flight to Madina where acknowledged as the Prophet, he found a following and launched

the crescentade that in less than a century would obliterate the Sassanids and buffet the frontiers of both India and China' (Keay, pp.239)

From the point of view of China-Tibet entente, what is notable of this period is that the **two empires of China and Tibet** emerged in each other's neighbourhood. 'An ambitious Kingdom and would be empire, Tibet had developed an integrated military and an effective administration, a literate culture based on its own grammar and script (an alphabetic one derived from a form of Sanskrit) Then with the capture of Kuqa in 670 CE, they virtually eliminated the Chinese presence throughout western Xinjiang and the Pamirs' (Keay, pp.263)

Keenness to control the trade on the silk road could have been the reason for this rivalry between the two empires. That they were each other's equal is evident from the following observations: 'Tong Taizhong sealed (the peace agreement, mine) with the dispatch of an imperial princess to Tibet. Further exchanges followed, the Tibetans regarding them as evidence of Tang vassalage and the Tong as evidence of Tibetan vassalage' (Keay, pp.243)

In this background, since Tibet has considered itself equal to China, being assured merely of the status of 'suzerainty' cannot satisfy her. The current balance of power is, however, no more the same as during the seventh century. Dalai Lama's approach in the China-Tibet imbroglio today is that of '**the middle way approach**', which was officially adopted by the fourth session of the 12th assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies in September 1997 (Wikipedia, 2024). Accordingly, they merely seek greater autonomy for Tibet.

In similar circumstances, however, Magnolia has been recognised as an independent country by the United Nations. Even if one agrees to the argument that Tibet became subservient to China in the thirteenth century, this was equally true for Magnolia. As pointed out by the author, Magnolia came under the influence of Soviet Russia and when the USSR disintegrated it declared itself as an independent country as the other CIS states (Commonwealth of Independent States). The example of Magnolia goes in favour of Tibet. The author may have expressed his views more candidly on the same.

Reference:

John Keay (2008), *China: A History*, Harper press London.

Wikipedia (2025), *Tibetan Sovereignty Debate*, en.m.wikipedia.org, 2.12.2015.

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