



'IMPLICATIONS OF THE KARMAPA RIVALRIES'

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Successions are often a messy business. When power, patronage and pelf are added, the scrabble for spoils is sharply accentuated. Even the incense-laden, cloistered confines of abbeys and monasteries in remote mountain redoubts are not immune from this affliction.

The Karma Kargyu, or Black Hat, which is a sub-sect of Tibetan Buddhism's second oldest sect and one which first propagated the Oral Tradition and practice of reincarnation, is currently in the grip of bitter succession rivalries. This rivalry is not restricted only to capturing the throne of the Gyalwa Karmapa, head of one of the four sub-sects of the Kargyu Tradition, but, more importantly, for the considerable influence, patronage and wealth that the position offers. The large number of Buddhists, particularly in Asia where the number of adherents is growing, ensures that high ranking Buddhist personages will continue to command a lot of influence.

The history of Buddhist sects in Tibet is, interestingly, replete with vivid accounts of often bitter infighting and intrigue. For nearly eight hundred years till the Gelugpa, or Yellow, sect finally gained the upper hand, the various sects struggled for territory as well as primacy and influence over Tibet. In the process, they interacted and sided with the Chinese Emperors and Mongol Khans. The latter were actually Buddhists and followers initially of the Sakya sect. It was, in fact, after the Mongol ruler Altan Khan invited Sonam Gyatso, the highly regarded abbot of the Drepung Monastery of the Gelugpa, or Yellow, sect to teach him and thereafter became a follower of the Yellow sect, that an imperial decree was promulgated granting the spiritual and temporal leadership of Tibet to this high ranking lama. It was also Altan Khan who bestowed the

title of 'Dalai Lama', or Ocean of Wisdom, on Sonam Gyatso of the Gelugpa sect in 1579. Interestingly, at the time these magnanimous gestures were made by the Mongol Khan a high ranking Karmapa monk was resident in his court! These developments preceded the dissipation of power of the then most powerful Tibetan Buddhist sect, namely the Sakya, and enabled the Gelugpa sect to edge ahead of the Nyingma, Sakya and others.

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Ranjung Rigpi Dorjee, the XVIth Gyalwa Karmapa, fled from his monastery in Tsurphu in Tibet in 1959 after the Chinese communist regime took over Tibet. He managed to bring out considerable wealth belonging to the sect with him. Once in exile he established the first monastery of the Karma Kargyu sect at Woodstock in the US. He later travelled to Sikkim where he was welcomed by the then Chogyal and allotted land at Rumtek to build a monastery. The monastery that he built at Rumtek between 1962-65 became his designated spiritual seat in exile. The Gyalwa Karmapa presides over the Karma Kargyu, or Black Hat, sect

with presently approximately 160 financially well endowed Dharma Chakra Centres spread across the world. The Karma Kargyu is a wealthy sect and it is also the dominant sect in sensitive areas along India's borders surrounding, and including, Sikkim and Bhutan. It has numerous monasteries owing allegiance to it in the vulnerable Indo-Himalayan belt. It is this that makes the internecine rivalry and its outcome a matter of direct concern for India.

After the demise of the XVIth Gyalwa Karmapa a council of four Regents was entrusted with the task of 'discovering' the reincarnation. **It was only after a lapse of ten years, during**

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raise serious doubts. According to accounts revealed by Ughyen Thinley Dorjee's close aides, the monk shimmied down from his residence on the second floor of Tsurphu monastery without arousing the guards on patrol either inside the monastery or its perimeter and got in to a waiting jeep in which he travelled most of the distance to the border. He covered some of the distance on foot and horseback before arriving on the border with Nepal. From there he took a waiting helicopter to India. The account is vague as to how he slipped past the guards at the monastery and how he avoided the PLA guards deployed at the bridges along the route. Considering that security in Tibet had become stringent after the March 1988 riots, it is difficult to imagine that PLA guards would allow a jeep to cross a protected bridge without checks. That there was prior planning for the escape is evident also from the advance visits of Ughyen Thinley Dorjee's sister and another accomplice to Bodh Gaya. She finally escaped with Ughyen Thinley Dorjee while six of his other siblings and parents remain behind in Tibet. Another area of doubt concerns Ughyen Thinley Dorjee's age. On arrival in India he was given a thorough medical examination at the PGI in Chandigarh where it was suggested that he was almost six years older than his declared age of 14 years.

Meanwhile, the other Regent, Shamar Rinpoche, who had serious differences with Tai Situ Rinpoche, propped up Thaye Thinley Dorjee as another candidate. Both these claimants were born in Tibet. There are two other claimants to the position of the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa, but it is Ughyen Thinley Dorjee and Thaye Thinley Dorjee who are the better known. Tai Situ Rinpoche, the Regent who 'discovered' and supported Ughyen Thinley Dorjee was also successful in securing the recognition of the Dalai Lama and Beijing for his candidate. This puts Ughyen Thinley Dorjee in the unique position of presently being the only claimant aspiring to head a Tibetan Buddhist sect who is formally recognized by both these entities. As long as the heads of the other major Tibetan Buddhist sects and the Dalai Lama are alive, the Gyalwa Karmapa

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will remain only the head of one of the sects. Thereafter, however, he could be one of the very few highest ranking lamas of Tibetan Buddhism who is formally recognised and will wield considerable influence over Buddhists. It is this that gives a sharp edge to the claims of the contending candidates for recognition as the true reincarnation

of the Gyalwa Karmapa and what could probably make the office of the Gyalwa Karmapa considerably more important and vulnerable to pressure and manipulation by Beijing. This vulnerability, especially in case the incumbent's leanings are unclear, would be a matter of serious discomfort to India.

Though the ongoing court battles over possession of the Rumtek monastery have delayed the formal enthronement of the Gyalwa Karmapa, among all the claimants Ughyen Thinley Dorjee has emerged as the front-runner as he is the more widely known. Formal enthronement at Rumtek monastery is mandatory for recognition as the Gyalwa Karmapa because the monastery is the spiritual seat of the Karmapa and the Black Hat, which is the religious symbol of office and said to be made of the black silken hair of angels, is kept there. Other riches belonging to the Gyalwa Karmapa and the sect are also kept in safe custody of the court in a strong room in the Rumtek monastery. Ughyen Thinley Dorjee and his supporters and followers have, therefore, repeatedly staged protests and made demands that he be allowed to visit Sikkim and the Rumtek monastery.

Thanks to the deft management of circumstances, Ughyen Thinley Dorjee has benefited from his physical proximity to the Dalai Lama. For convenience of receiving teaching and guidance from the Dalai Lama, the then 14-year old Ughyen Thinley Dorjee was lodged in the Gyutoe monastery in the same compound as the Dalai Lama's establishment. This had the advantage of affording Ughyen Thinley Dorjee an opportunity to attend the Dalai Lama's

occasional public audiences and prayers and, because of the absence of the heads of the other sects and virtue of his position, be seated next to the Dalai Lama. In public perception this made Ughyen Thinley Dorjee second in rank to the Dalai Lama. This proximity simultaneously encouraged followers coming for an audience with the Dalai Lama to meet Ughyen Thinley Dorjee too, and the number of his adherents increased. Ughyen Thinley Dorjee's supporters, some

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of whom are in the Dalai Lama's establishment, have also vigorously propagated his cause in India and abroad.

Another advantage for Ughyen Thinley Dorjee is the effective machinery that his aides seem to have created to popularize his claims. An example is the manner in which in the midst of recent revelations that some of his aides had engaged in large-scale illegal financial transactions including the 'benami' purchase of land at different locations, numerous articles in the

media incorrectly referred to him as the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa. His sympathizers and followers also quickly organized public protests in a bid to divert attention from the financial irregularities and pressurize the government into waiving legal provisions. The Dalai Lama publicly expressed support for Ughyen Thinley Dorjee, though he did say that the money should have been handed over to a trust and that the financial irregularities must be enquired into. From the media revelations there appears to be little doubt that large sums of cash of different currencies, estimated to exceed one and a half million US dollars, were kept in Ughyen Thinley Dorjee's office. His close aides have also, it is alleged, been engaged in 'benami' land deals in various locations. The matter is serious and deserves a thorough probe, particularly to ascertain the locations where land was proposed to be purchased and whether the money was used for purposes other than purchase of land.

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The departure of the Dalai Lama from the scene will introduce an additional complication. There is likely to be enhanced restiveness among the almost six million Tibetans inside China and the one and a half million-strong Tibetan diaspora in exile would be leaderless. In this backdrop the role of any council to manage the transition, that the Dalai Lama may constitute while he is alive, will be crucial.

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crucial. This council will have to retain the Tibetan peoples' confidence and provide them leadership till such time as the next reincarnate Dalai Lama is able to assume the mantle. It will simultaneously need to continue the activities started by the present Dalai Lama and maintain the relationships forged with various governments, parliamentarians and organisations. This phase where the council would have to play a vital role could last for anywhere up to fifteen years, which is the time a reincarnate of the present Dalai Lama would require to get ready to take on his responsibilities. The role and character of the inheritor to the throne of the Gyalwa Karmapa at such a time will, therefore, be crucial. These developments together will impact on India's border negotiations with China and its ability to maintain stability and calm along the vulnerable Indo-Himalayan border belt which is dominated by followers of Tibetan Buddhism.

Reports of the financial irregularities involving close aides of Ughyen Thinley Dorjee have surfaced at an inconvenient time. The matter would need to be handled with caution and prudence, particularly as Ughyen Thinley Dorjee has already been in India for over a decade. While investigations must be thorough and compliance with laws enforced, the Tibetan community in exile in India would simultaneously require re-assurance that there will be no witch-hunt and no need for panic. It would also need to be ensured in the larger national interest that aspersions are not cast on the Dalai Lama and his institution.



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