

Azha

The Tibetan reality

By Seema Mustafa

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TIBET: There are certain political realities that confront you the moment you enter Tibet. And these are away from what is politically right or wrong. Or what is romantic, or desirable, or perhaps even just. But these are realities that are irreversible, or to put it simply, that just are.

Tibet is an autonomous province of China, and that is irreversible. The 14th Dalai Lama currently in exile in Dharamsala can return only as a religious figure, accepting the status of Tibet as part of China, and that is irreversible. And there is no one, not the people claiming to be running a government out of Dharamsala, or their western backers who can now change the situation. Tibet is one of the 31 autonomous regions of China, and there is *currently no power in the world that can change that reality.*

The next question, thus, is: How is China tackling the issue? After years of being defensive, and without a strategy, Beijing has emerged from the isolation on Tibet to *aggressively target* the Tibetans through development, with the growth rate in the region currently registering a *phenomenal 13 per cent*. In just five years the face of Lhasa, and the rest of Tibet, has changed. Wide roads, new buildings, hotels, communication links, and now the train have taken Tibet by storm, with the locals still getting used to the development that has generated immense employment opportunities. Tourism is being encouraged, with the trains to Tibet carrying visitors from the United States to Australia to Singapore, as China showcases its most controversial region to the world.

Development is the alternative being offered for religiosity. And it is a tempting alternative, as it brings the long neglected mountainous region into the mainstream. It generates jobs, which is attracting many Tibetans back to the region from India and Nepal. It generates housing, that is encouraging the nomadic tribes and the herdsmen to develop houses that they are now being able to build with the help of

government subsidies. It generates education, with Tibet getting help from Beijing and the neighbouring provinces, to set up an educational structure from the kindergarten to the university. It generates healthcare, with the lifespan having increased from 30 odd years to 67 years within three decades. It generates tourism, with Tibet witnessing a mushrooming of hotels and restaurants. Lhasa, for instance, now offers cuisines from all over the world and local Tibetans, with far more purchasing power than before, eating out and sampling meals from mainland China and the West. It generates a higher standard of life, with cities like Lhasa and Xingetse and others being developed on a war footing.

It is clear that the Chinese hope that development will cut into religiosity, and weaken the hold that religion clearly has on Tibet. And to ensure that there is no backlash, the new policy is to accommodate

are free to observe their rituals, and it is true that the monasteries are being looked after and are currently thriving. In fact, the ritualistic debate between Buddhist monks has now become a tourist attraction. Religion has a major role in the average Tibetan's life, and development while necessary will not provide a quick and easy counter.

Some of the propaganda coming out of Dharamsala and Washington of course, does not wash. It is not true that the Tibetans are being overtaken by the influx of mainland Chinese into the region. In fact, while the government has a mix of both Tibetans and Hans, the top positions are still occupied by the former who remain in the majority. The hotel industry and businesses are largely run by the Tibetans who alone can weather the rough climatic conditions, and are also clear that they will not allow their region to be swamped by any other community. It is also not true that the Tibetans in the autonomous

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and at moments to even encourage religion. For instance, Tibet is the only one of the 31 autonomous provinces in China to be given subsidies and concessions. The people do not have to follow the mandatory norms of birth control and are free to have as many children as they want. A young Tibetan government official who has only one child points out, "Well, we have a huge area to cover, our population is very low." He is a member of the communist party and so is not a practising Buddhist. But most others are, and standing outside the Potala Palace (the Dalai Lama's palace) one can see Tibetans coming throughout the day to pay homage. Carrying prayer wheels, and with little Tibetan dogs by their sides, thousands trickle by, prostrating themselves before beginning their day. Government officials make it clear that there is no interference in religion, the people

region are miserable, poor and oppressed. They have a say in their future, and the Chinese government is too clever to do it any other way as the policy now is clearly to pull Tibet into mainline China through persuasion and development. This is not to say that the region is free from oppression, that is built into the system. But it is definitely to say that oppression is no longer the means for the end of the new Chinese policy currently in operation.

Of course the age old debate between ecologists and developers remains. The train connecting Tibet to Beijing and other parts of China is destroying the ecology; the settling down of the indigenous tribes is harmful for them; etc., etc. Development, in other words, is destroying the pristine purity of Tibet. But as a Tibetan says, "The Americans just want us to live as a museum, herding cattle, and

praying in the monasteries." He is of the new generation that has suddenly found that every opportunity is now his for the asking. He has a "great job," a car of his dreams, a house in a summer resort, and "I can do what I want while living here in Tibet, I do not need to go anywhere else." He and his young friends frequent the nightclubs in Lhasa till the early hours of the morning, visit the different restaurants, and revel in their newfound purchasing power.

But the shadow of the Dalai Lama remains. After all, the Tibetan religion needs a head, and he is now in Dharamsala. It is because of this that the Chinese government officials make it clear that all doors are open, that he is free to return as a religious and not a political entity, and that he must of course accept the reality of Tibet as part of China. The Chinese are aware of the extent of his influence, but it is difficult to gauge what will happen if he does return to Tibet. Or for that matter dies while at Dharamsala. A Tibetan government official admits, "(his death) could be a bomb, or it could not have too much reaction, it is too difficult to say." But there are many in Tibet who have been to Dharamsala but have returned because Tibet is home, and now has more opportunities than the government in exile has to offer. There are many who are coming back, as the word of the fast-paced development spreads. Knowledge of English is an advantage and those returning after schooling in India find themselves in managerial positions.

Another reality is that the Chinese will not accept the return of the Dalai Lama on any terms but their own. And under these he will have to function as a religious leader — probably under constraints — and will not be allowed to intervene in political matters at any level. They will keep the doors "open" for talks, but these talks are not likely to go anywhere, at least not for the next many years. It is also true that the little flame that is burning at Dharamsala has influenced the Chinese policy on Tibet, ensuring a certain autonomy for the Tibetans, a respect and sensitivity that might not have been available to them otherwise. And for this, if nothing else, it is important for the flame to continue burning as the Chinese today care far more for world opinion than they are prepared to admit. COURTESY THE ASIAN AGE