

Rise and fall of the great statesman: Desi Sangye Gyatso of Tibet

Pradeep Kumar Sanyal

An important phase of Tibetan political history runs through 17th century, its repercussions reflected in the first half of 18th century and afterwards. The 5th Dalai Lama's rule which evolved as an institution of authority on its own was through the contributions of four outstanding personalities like Desi Sonam Choephel, Gushi Khan, the 5th Dalai Lama himself and lastly Desi Sangye Gyatso, who raised the institution to a new height.

The great fifth revered as Gyalba Ngapa attained for Tibet the position of supremacy in relation to neighbours, particularly Mongolia and China, in the field of spiritual and political influence and authority. Desi Sangye Gyatso who was an witness and was involved with the authority justly carried out the policies and programs of Dalai Lama even after his death in 1682. He was an intelligent and energetic young man with high aspiration to wield great authority attached to the person and institution of Dalai Lama. A scholar and man of letters, he had five great literary works to his credit. Apart from governmental, he attained for Gelugpa sect, a centrally administered body to consolidate both spiritual and secular powers, together.

After Dalai Lama's death to overcome the vacuum period i.e. search of incarnation and minority Desi devised "the rule in absentia". To perpetuate the Dalai Lama's authority in person and his image he, according to prevalent custom, kept the death news a secret. Formally it was announced that the Dalai Lama had gone on a retreat hence no audience is possible except of Desi, who can obtain his orders. Thus the administration rolled on the name and authority of the Dalai Lama's person. More so presence of the Dalai Lama's stature was only match to quell the Manchu design.

In China, Emperor Shun Hsi (d.1661) had developed a working relationship with the fifth Dalai Lama and was content with that. His son, K'ang Hsi, enthroned in 1666, pursued the same relationship. But he was faced with the rebellion from three feudatories. He sought Dalai Lama's help as he had good relationship with two of the feudatories. But it proved misnomer. Wu San Kuei, prince of Yunan, openly revolted in 1674. which continued for years. Later the Emperor was surprised to receive a letter from the Dalai Lama to pardon Wu San Kuei, which was not expected from a person of Dalai Lama's status. Actually it was from Desi.

In Mongolia. after Gushi Khan's death, Qoshot's power was on the wane. Jungars under the leadership of Gaden Thaiji were mobilizing Mongol tribal powers. Gaden who was educated from Lhasa sought and got blessings from the Dalai Lama for his uniting effort. Gaden's initial success within Mongolia and advance toward China prompted

Desi to side with Gaden's fortune to overcome Manchu intervention in Tibet. But it proved to be a miscalculation for which Tibet had to pay dearly in future. Finally, Gaden was defeated in 1696 at the battle of Jao modo.

Desi's reign was faultless and he completed "Phodrang Marpo" a nine-storey building on Potala in 1693. There he entombed Dalai Lama's remains. Gradually in and out of Tibet suspicion was growing about Dalai Lama's death. More so to the emperor, when he received a letter in the name of Dalai Lama suggesting him to hand over, Tu-sei-Tu Khan, his refuge to Gaden. Emperor sought the news of death, but Desi avoided a direct answer. From here Chinese policy towards Tibet changes.

Desi's problems were not over. His secret search and initiation of child Dalai Lama as sixth by the Panchen Lama proved wrong in the sense that the boy grew to age as different in nature and characters as a Dalai Lama should be. He was boisterous and had a liking for free life. He even relinquished his Getsul vows. A section of officials, lay and monks suspected his spirituality, which sided with Chinese court on this issue.

Gaden's defeat caused vacuums of power in Mongolia and Desi's acts and Dalai Lama's non-presence, prompted Gushi Khan's descendants who were till then aloof to recapture their lost position as ruler of Tibet. One of his grandsons Lazang Khan removed his brother from the throne of Ko-ko-nor. Then he marched towards Tibet. Desi not to lose his authority and having enmity to Lazang Khan, contrary to counsel given by heads of great monasteries, stood against him.

In 1697. Desi officially announced and also communicated death-news to the Emperor. The emperor was offended and tried to convince Mongol tribes that Desi hid the news to usurp the power to rule. Consequently. in 1703 Desi resigned but installed his son Ngawang Rinchen as regent to rule from behind the curtain, which he did up to 1705. Lazang Khan ultimately captured Lhasa but freed Sangye Gyatso on seeking pardon. Yet a tragic end awaited when Lazang Khan's wife, Tseban-Gyalmo, whom Desi intended to marry, had enmity and hatred to him, caused him to death on 6th September 1605 at Tod-lun valley.

Thus ends the long spell of (nearly twenty-five years) reign of a 'Silent Hero' of Tibetan history whose experiment of the 'rule in absentia' is unique. His statecraft was unparalleled and gave no respite to the emperor for fifteen long years. Some uncalled-for developments robbed him of the credit of great statesmanship. Yet. Tibetans remember him as man of letters, a great statesman and sustainer of the institution of Dalai Lama.