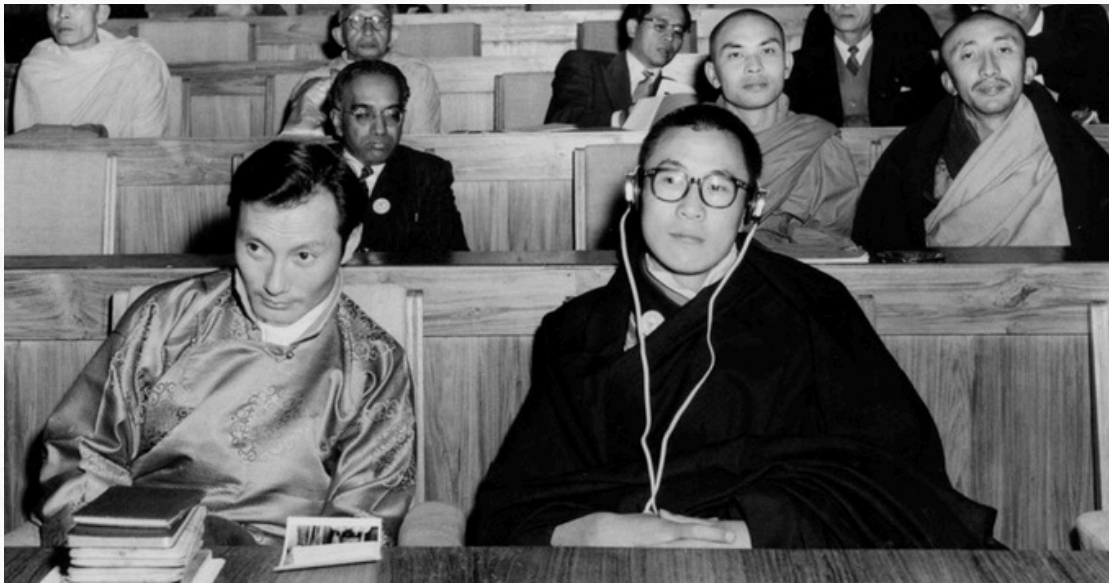


## Tibet's tryst with India's Democracy: Tibetan advocacy in India at the Parliament

- Tenzing Dhamdul, (Senior Researcher, FNVA)



*His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India, where he took part in the 2500th birth anniversary of Lord Buddha. Courtesy His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet*

### Prologue:

The recent film 'Evolution of Tibetan Democracy in Exile' showed how deep the ties between Tibet and India run across these two great civilizations. In the film, His Holiness the Dalai Lama recalls how he experienced his tryst with democracy when he visited India in 1956. He saw the Indian Parliament in New Delhi and observed the democratic system including the freedom of speech in person. Reflecting on this, during the latest winter session of the parliament, on 16th December 2024, Shri Tapir Gao, a member of parliament from the state of Arunachal Pradesh laid before the parliament, the need to recognise the Institution of the Dalai Lama and how Beijing already has plans in place for his succession/reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama. The fact that Tibet and the Dalai Lama which is a sensitive subject for New Delhi, are being highlighted on such a significant political platform underscores the goodwill, understanding and continued significance of Tibet to India.

It is interesting to note the Indian Parliament was among the first legislative bodies to deliberate and raise the issue of Tibet in their halls when China under the Communist regime began illegally occupying it since its establishment as the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1949 onwards. Recently from 25th November onwards, I had the privilege of engaging on Tibet with several members of the Indian Parliament through the Tibet Advocacy Alliance – India. This engagement culminated in the seminar on China's Colonial Boarding Schools in Tibet: Reshaping Social and Cultural Landscape by Dr. Gyal Lo on 29th November, who has first-hand experience on this subject as he studied and taught in Tibet.

This was not my first experience engaging with parliament members in Tibet. Through my association with the Foundation for Non-violent Alternatives (FNVA) and participating in the Universal Periodic



*The Tibet Advocacy Alliance - India and their appeal letter. Courtesy Tibet Advocacy Alliance - India*

Review (UPR) engagement, I had the honour of engaging with them. Furthermore, being engaged with the India Tibet Coordination Office (ITCO), an office in New Delhi under the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) popularly known as the Tibetan Government in Exile, I have been able to gain and grasp some level of understanding of how Tibetan Advocacy and engagements take place when it comes to the political leadership here in New Delhi on Tibet and more particularly the members of the Parliament.

### **Engagements with Parliamentarians:**

India is the largest democracy in the world, and after the recent 2024 General Elections in the 18th Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's parliament, where members are elected directly by the people) 52% of the 543 constituencies/seats, amounting to 280, are held by newly elected members for the 1st time. This demonstrates the strong vibrancy of India's democracy from the structural lens and highlights its ever-continuing evolution as a democratic state since its inception as a modern nation-state in 1947.

The initial plan was to engage with them right after the election in the immediate monsoon session of the parliament, but things did not materialise as expected. It was then decided to have our engagement during the winter session of the parliament. There were three major key appeals we were to deliberate and engage, them being:

1. *Recognise Tibet as an occupied nation*
2. *Honour the legacy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the Indian Parliament and celebrate his 90th birthday.*
3. *Advocate for the protection of Tibetan culture and language.*

With such a background and context as part of the Tibet Advocacy Alliance I along with my colleagues from the Tibetan Youth Congress, Tibetan Women's Association, Students for a Free Tibet, National Democratic Party of Tibet and the International Tibet Network set forth together in engaging and deliberating on Tibet with the honourable members of parliament from 25th November onwards.





I was involved in person in these deliberations for 2 days because upon consulting with my office, we thought it would be wise to have my colleagues from FNVA also take part and learn about the intricacies and engagements on Tibet with the members of parliament. In these 2 days, I was privileged to discuss and deliberate on Tibet with a total of 12 MPs, ranging from different political parties, having different backgrounds and more importantly having different views on Tibet. However, amidst all this, one thing remained common among them, which was the staunch support towards the Tibetan people and its cause and the deep reverence they had for His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

There were several things that I observed and learned:

### **1. Enduring bond between India and Tibet: Passed onto generations.**

Among the MPs I met, there were a good number of them who traced their relationship and support to Tibet from senior leaders whom they looked up to and worked with. Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Acharya Kripalani, Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Mulayam Singh Yadav etc. are some whom they would recall and draw inspiration from.

This continued connection where the story of Tibet is passed down to India's leadership drew my curiosity. It made me linger and reflect on how we Tibetans must likewise reciprocate and pass on these stories and incidents of support from India to the next generation of Tibetans. Otherwise, there is real concern that these valuable experiences may become little more than a shadowed footnote in history.



*Engaging with Dr. Shashi Tharoor on Tibet at his office. Courtesy Tibet Advocacy Alliance - India*

Furthermore, several leaders I met had a keen sense of understanding and acknowledged how the ties between India and Tibet were not just since the Dalai Lama was welcomed to India as an honoured guest but went much deeper, extending to the civilisational link between the two countries. How Buddhism originated and flourished in India and spread to Tibet was much discussed when we engaged on its current status in occupied Tibet, whereby Beijing of late under Xi Jinping has openly called for Tibetan Buddhism with Chinese characteristics.



*Members of Tibetan Parliament in Exile with the members of the All-Party Indian Parliamentary Forum for Tibet (APIPFT).  
Courtesy the Central Tibetan Administration*

## **2. The APIPFT and yearning to learn more about Tibet.**

There were a variety of MPs we met and engaged with, some having worked and engaged in Tibet previously and some also being part of the All-Party Indian Parliamentary Forum for Tibet (APIPFT). APIPFT is the parliamentary body of MPs from different political parties that support and bring out initiatives on Tibet. And then some were new to Tibet as well.

The All-Party Indian Parliamentary Forum (APIPFT) was a body that was set up in 1970 under the leadership of M.C. Chagla and included distinguished leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and George Fernandes deeply involved in it. It has been raising Tibet on varying levels including governmental and non-governmental forums. The latest mention of Tibet in the Indian parliament during the winter session by Shri Tapir Gao is indicative of its role. He is currently the co-convenor of the APIPFT which is convened/led by Shri Bhartuhari Mahtab, whom we had the pleasure of engaging with during our advocacy. Furthermore, this group recently engaged with the Tibetan Parliament in Exile and brought forth a 12-point resolution on Tibet. I look forward to seeing more such engagements between Tibetan and Indian leaders on such a shared platform. Something which Beijing disagrees with and made it clear by sending a letter to Indian MPs in 2021 who attended such a gathering with the Indian MPs outraged by the letter from the Chinese embassy that asked the Indian leaders to 'refrain' from supporting Tibet.

The MPs we met had the desire to learn and know more about Tibet including its latest development. This provides assurances that research and writing on Tibet is being read and there is a space here.

## **3. India's Sanskar, the world must know.**

The meeting of 12 MPs in two days taught me several aspects of life and one was the proper way to receive people and welcome guests. Being someone who grew up in India as a Tibetan refugee, my parents also showed this to me through their actions and I have also learned this from my office engagements. Witnessing this being practised by the MPs showed me and made me understand the concept of Sanskar, which is deeply rooted in the way of life here in India. And this is something not only us Tibetans but everybody in the world can learn from India here.





#### 4. Space and opportunity for Tibetans.

Based on this, I realise that Tibetans can do a lot here by seizing the opportunities at hand. Perhaps this understanding might have come to me because I was previously involved in this field, and many Tibetans have already been working on this. However, the significant value of our continued engagement in this space, whether through the APIPFT or other platforms, is, in my opinion, confirmed.

One tried and tested approach here would be to understand the MPs here and what they stand for. Such a simple exercise for Tibetans when meeting the MPs in the future would do wonders and eventually lead to close friendships that Indian and Tibetan leaders shared and can be continued with the coming generations of leaders.

The second would be to understand the parliamentary mechanism and how best one can advocate for Tibet and the Dalai Lama in the houses. Because there are certainly ways and means through which one can work on this and certain MPs we met were even kind enough to offer their assistance here. Would raising Tibet in the zero hour be relevant? How about having a session and resolution to honour the legacy of the Dalai Lama to India in the Indian parliament? Why not invite the Tibetan leadership to the parliament and acknowledge their presence when the parliamentary session is ongoing? (This is something that the Tibetan Parliament in Exile practices when it invites guests, dignitaries and friends of Tibet.)

Third, engage extensively with local leadership including Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). Tibetans in India are spread through different states and regions and have access to local leadership and tapping into them will eventually bring a surge in discussions on Tibet. MPs point out how they know about Tibet through their engagements with them in their constituency, where Tibetan settlements are present and not through engagements in Delhi.



*Tibetan Refugees arriving at Transit Camps in India. Courtesy M10 Memorial*

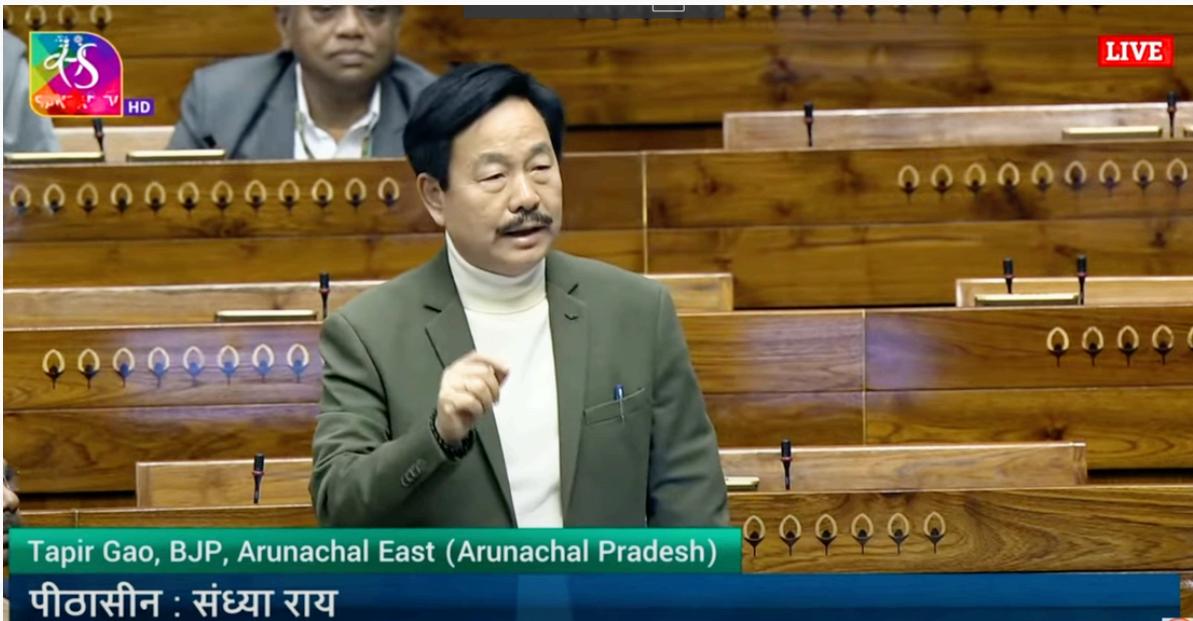
Last and most importantly, never forget what India as a country did for Tibet by reaching out to us when no one and I say this again, when no one in the world dared to help us out. I have read about this and even heard about it from our elders but during the engagements with the MPs, I felt this strongly and it made me understand what India means for Tibet and how the shared bonhomie transcends geopolitics here. Many among the younger generation, which I am part of forget this - as we tend to associate India with our day-to-day life engagements with the Indian community but India is not limited to this and is much larger for us Tibetans. We must continue to remember this as with each passing day, we are making history between Tibet and India.



## Conclusion and what the future holds:

I have tried my best to share my experience and understanding of Tibetan advocacy at the Indian parliament through the exercises I have undertaken. Elder generations of Tibetans and the current Tibetan leadership through several years of engagement have built a space where Tibetans are welcomed and listened to. We, the coming generation of Tibetans must build on it and structure it on current needs through understanding the past. It has been much food for thought to me and I hope it will help others when engaging with the political leadership in India.

With the world currently moulding and positioning itself, Tibetans throughout the world - especially us in exile and the diaspora must be able to champion and be the voice of our sisters and brothers in occupied Tibet. They are currently under certain limitations through Chinese occupation but have continued to make us proud. We must take inspiration from them and with each passing day - improve our capabilities. India will continue to be a bastion of support to us in light of its tussle and strategic competition with China. We must be able to understand these nuances and best chart our path forward, something which under the leadership of the Dalai Lama, we have been able to do and should also be achievable if we put our wits together under the leadership of the Central Tibetan Administration which continues to function from Dharamshala, India.



*Shri Tapir Gao speaking on the Dalai Lama in the Indian Parliament on 16th December, 2024. Courtesy Sansad TV*



[www.fnvaworld.org](http://www.fnvaworld.org)

Foundation for Non-violent Alternatives (FNVA)

143, 4th Floor, Uday Park, New Delhi, 49

office@fnvaworld.org