

THE PANCHEN IN POLITICS
By R.N. Rahul

Much of the future history of Tibet centres round the person of the young boy Tuteng-Chuh-chik who claims to be the Panchen Lama of Tibet. He is a key figure in Sino-Tibetan politics, for the Chinese see in him a useful ally in their designs on Tibet. His present camp followers, old lama and lay officials from Tashil-humpo want to use him to square old scores with the Dalai Lama's party. He would have committed a blunder had he become a mere tool in the hands of Che Jigma, a courtier of the last Panchen Lama and President of the Provisional Government of Tibet in Chinghai, whose death was reported the other day.

The Chinese are trying to play up this young Rimpoche as the superior of the Dalai Lama even in temporal matters. They are on unsure ground here, for the last Panchen Lama was deprived of even his petty secular privileges by the Lhasa Government because of possible politico-spiritual conflict between the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. The present Panchen Lama would be recognized by the Government of the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Rimpoche of Tibet if he returns without an escort of troops of the "liberation army."

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In Tibet, where governmental and social institutions are based on religious aspirations, all power is in the hands of high autocratic lamas. Some lamas rule whole districts. A high incarnate lama called the "Pa-pa-La" governs Ch'ando, a frontier district two months' journey from Lhasa. The Grand Lama of Sakya, the descendant of the priest kings of Tibet who firmly established themselves by the end of the 13th century, governs his own fief in south-west Tibet. Among other such Lama overlords the Panchen Rimpoche, incorrectly called the Tashi Lama owing to the proximity of Tashil-humpo (the official residence of the Panchen Lama) to the outside world, holds absolute power over the ecclesiastical and temporal affairs of the many districts of the Tsang province in South Tibet. He constitutes almost a sort of parallel government in Tibet; his own Kalon Lama (Lama Minister) and the Kung Kushog (the ducal brother of the Panchen) conduct for him all the ecclesiastical and temporal affairs of Labrang, the Government of Tashilhumpo.

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The intimate relations of the last Panchen Lama, the sixth in the line, with the British and the Chinese were a matter of serious concern to the Lhasa authorities, for

they always calculated these to be the Panchen Lama's political manoeuvrings for supremacy in the temporal affairs of Tibet. This created much jealousy and a feeling of rivalry between Lhasa and Tashilhunpo. The Lhasan authorities were always seeking an opportunity to eliminate the Panchen element from their internal affairs and in 1923 the feeling of antagonism became so intense and relations between the holy Dalai Lama and the serene Panchen Rimpoche became so strained that the latter had to flee to China, dying there in November 1937.

The Panchen Rimpoche, as incarnation of the Dhyani Buddha Amitabha, considers himself to be the spiritual head of Tibet, never becoming involved in worldly matters. "I am a religious devotee," wrote the fourth Panchen to Warren Hastings, and "it is the custom of my sect, with rosary in our hands, to pray for the welfare of all mankind and for the peace and happiness of the inhabitants of this country." The character of the last Panchen Lama impressed Sir Charles Bell so deeply that he paid high tribute to that remarkable Living Buddha: "It is good there is such a man in Tibet; it is good that there are such men in the world."

There is still a section of the Tibetans who believe the Panchen Lama to be the spiritual guide of the Dalai Lama. But it is now arguable whether the Panchen Lama is the equal or the superior in holiness of the Dalai Lama.

The reincarnation of the present Panchen Lama which should have caused great rejoicing among the Tibetans who mourned the flight to China in the severe winter of 1923 and the death of the sixth Panchen Lama at the very threshold of Tibet in 1937, is a matter of sadness for his people and their land. The present Panchen Lama's alliance with subversive elements does not ensure their happiness and the freedom of their country.

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