

Sowing dissent and undermining the Dalai Lama

The Tibetan Buddhist deity, Dorje Shugden, whose worship can be traced back to the 17th century, is presenting the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administrations with problems that will simply not go away. The followers of the deity, though minor in terms of numbers, continue to attract labels of sectarianism and fundamentalism, which they counter with accusations of autocracy and intolerance on the part of the exiled Tibetan leadership in Dharamsala and the Dalai Lama in particular. Although arcane to outsiders, in recent years the dispute has had a disproportionate effect on contemporary Tibetan politics both inside and outside Tibet.

On 28 April 2008, Shugden devotees organised a press conference in New Delhi. The declared intention of the event was to publicly express concerns about the group's perceived persecution at the hands of the Tibetan exile community. The speakers, however, were shrill in their criticism of the Dalai Lama, who they portrayed as an arbitrary ruler effectively preaching violence and responsible for the protests that took place in Tibet during spring 2008. Their condemnation echoed, in parts literally, comments made by the Chinese authorities against the Dalai Lama.

Dorje Shugden worship has always been divisive, but the controversy around it has heated up with the ostensible support of the Chinese authorities for its devotees within Tibet. The press conference in Delhi came after months of tension following the arrival in India of a group of Shugden followers from Tibet in Autumn 2007, i.e. long before the protests of spring 2008. It also appears to be connected to protests that Shugden devotees have vowed to carry out against the Dalai Lama in the West, particularly during his forthcoming visit to the UK where, with the New Kadampa Tradition, the group has its main western following.

Beijing's language Tibetan words

The press conference was organised by the Indian headquarters of the Shugden group, the Dorjee Shugden Devotees Charitable and Religious Society (DSDCRS), which is based in the Tibetan settlement of Majnu Ka Tila, Delhi. Kundeling Rinpoche founder and head of Atisha Charitable Trust, Bangalore, a welfare organisation for the group, addressed the gathering. As well as many Indian correspondents, two Chinese journalists from the official Chinese news agency Xinhua were also present. Kundeling Rinpoche was critical of the Dalai Lama for his stand on autonomy for Tibet and for his alleged failure to condemn the recent violent riots in Lhasa. He also accused the Dalai Lama of persecuting Shugden worshippers. A press release issued by the DSDCRS stated: *"At a time when Tibet is going through one of its most difficult periods, we are compelled to speak as the problem they face [(the Shugden worshipper)] is not a simple or minor one and affects countless Tibetans both in Tibet and in exile"*.

In a politically curious move, Kundeling Rinpoche blamed the Dalai Lama for ditching the goal of Tibetan independence in favour of autonomy, while accusing the US and the West for creating the Shugden controversy to belittle China. He described the Dalai Lama as a pawn of US intelligence, adding he had created the Shugden issue to distract Tibetans and the international community from his primary goal of garnering support for his political aims. Comparing the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration's (CTA) handling of the Shugden group with apartheid and Nazi atrocities, Kundeling Rinpoche accused the Dalai Lama of having incited the spring 2008 unrest in Tibet and the subsequent worldwide demonstrations in order to conceal his *"apartheid policy"*. The comparisons with apartheid and the Holocaust appear to be a response to the Dalai Lama's accusation that Chinese policy is causing *"cultural genocide"* in Tibet.

Kundeling Rinpoche also accused the Dalai Lama of spoiling the good relations between India and China and claimed that the Indian Government is unhappy about his political activities on Indian soil, quoting a recent statement by the Indian External Affairs Minister that allegedly expressed this view. In a similar vein, he questioned the right of the Dalai Lama to run a parallel government, with its own separate constitution, in a sovereign India. Responding to some pointed queries from the Xinhua correspondents, he accused the Dalai Lama of instigating persecution, segregation and religious profiling in Tibetan settlements, thus leading to a dwindling number of Tibetan Shugden followers.

A seven-page anonymous pamphlet, entitled: *'A story of betrayal and unabated persecution'*, was distributed by the DSDCRS at the press conference. The pamphlet argues that, in contrast to his image as a pacifist, the Dalai Lama has never been averse to violence as in the past he allegedly asked the US to provide arms to Tibetan resistance fighters based in Mustang, Nepal, and even now he sends agents into Tibet in order to disrupt the political situation there. In what reads like editorials from Xinhua or Tibet Daily, the pamphlet claims: *"His dirty moves at home and abroad earn him applause and pollution of religion gets standing ovation in the west"*[sic].

Kundeling Rinpoche's speech also suggested that opposition to the Dalai Lama by pro-independence exile activists has been *"stage-managed for media consumption"* and *"allows him to repeat that he abhors violence and may resign"*. It was, according to the pamphlet, *"intriguing"* that the Dalai Lama referred to *"ethnically motivated rioting in Lhasa in March"* as peaceful and that he failed to condemn it. It further suggests that *"Tibetans are generally not motivated to action unless the Dalai Lama backed by Washington gives [his] nod to the venture"* and it is the *"promise of American funding that solicits visits from the US Ambassador in Delhi and US Congress Secretary Nancy Pelosi [(her correct title is: Speaker of the House of Representatives)] to Dharamsala at the peak of ongoing unrest and demonstrations"*.

The Shugden issue in past and present

Dorje Shugden, also known as Dholgyal, is a protective deity linked to sectarian tendencies among the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, and its veneration has many of the characteristics of a cult. Although belonging to the Gelugpa, the Dalai Lama, has advised against the worship of Shugden for years, but in stronger words since 1996, because he believes it to *"foster religious intolerance and lead to the degeneration of Buddhism into a cult of spirit worship"*.

In Tibet prior to 1959, the worship of Shugden was widespread among the politically dominant Gelugpa school, but particularly so within religious lineages that were more ardent defenders of the Gelugpa supremacy. Strongholds of Shugden followers were mainly in eastern Tibet where there was also a strong presence of other schools, particularly the Kagyupa school⁽¹⁾, but also the monastery of Sera in Lhasa and, to a lesser extent, the Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Shigatse, the main seat of the Panchen Lama, the second highest leader in the Tibetan religious hierarchy.

Historians see the Shugden cult as having flourished under the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682). Although he established the supremacy of the Gelugpa school and was the first Dalai Lama to exert political power over Tibet, spiritually, Lobsang Gyatso was also firmly

linked to other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He felt a particular affinity with the Nyingmapa, the most ancient school of Buddhism in Tibet, and integrated some of their traditions into state rituals. His promotion of Nyingmapa deities to the status of state oracles and ritual protectors drew objections within his own Gelugpa school, giving rise to the first historically verifiable appearances of the Shugden cult.

In the twentieth century, the Shugden cult was propagated from Sera monastery by Lama Pabongka, who was as universally acknowledged for his scholarship as for his recusant attitude towards other Buddhist schools. After 1959, the dominance of the Gelugpa establishment within early Tibetan exile institutions raised strong tensions, threatening to split the community. One of the most influential personalities of the early years in exile, a disciple of Pabongka and fervent Shugden follower, was one of the late tutors of the current Dalai Lama, Trijang Rinpoche. The Dalai Lama, however, is known for having had a more hearty relationship to his other tutor, the late Ling Rinpoche, whose more open and ecumenical attitude strongly influenced him. As time went by, the Dalai Lama reformed the exile institutions to make them more inclusive to different Tibetan groups of various regional and religious backgrounds. He had expressed his reservations towards the Shugden cult for many years, before taking a more clearly disapproving stance in 1996. He has consistently advised Tibetans, and particularly monks, to rethink their attitudes towards Shugden and requested that, if they do not feel able to give up its worship, to refrain from participating in religious ceremonies that he led personally. Although the move created some tensions within the exile community, partly due to pressures exerted on Shugden followers by some over zealous Tibetans, as a whole, these eased over the years, mainly because the most influential Shugden detractors gave up the cult or relocated outside India. Most laypeople, given that the cult was mainly a monastic phenomenon, followed instinctively the advice of their supreme spiritual leader.

Tibetans in Tibet widely followed the advice of the Dalai Lama too and most, where they have the choice, shun the Shugden cult and the monasteries practicing it. The majority of monks in the monastery of Sera in Lhasa, once the greatest centre of the cult, appear to have given it up. However, the PRC authorities, both at regional and central level, have been generous with financial and administrative support to Shugden groups and their programmes. The rush in championing the Shugden cause gives those cadres supporting it privileged access to funds and enhances their personal stature. Tibetan lamas living in Nepal or in the West who have remained dedicated to the Shugden group are frequent visitors to Tibet and regular guests of state-sponsored conferences on Buddhism or Tibetan culture and history in the PRC. Gyaltsen Norbu (Chin.: *Gyaincain Norbu*), the boy chosen by the Chinese authorities for the position of 11th Panchen Lama, is believed to be surrounded by teachers who belong to the Shugden group. Although monastic communities' resistance against the state-supported introduction or re-introduction of Shugden largely takes place at a subtle level, tensions surface time and time again. The arrest and sentencing of Tenzin Deleg Rinpoche in 2002, for example, is connected with the underground struggle over Shugden worship.

The recent Shugden campaign

Since late 2005 - early 2006, there has been an increasing number of Shugden-related incidents and activities within, and originating from, Tibetan regions. These are possibly due to the increasing readiness of Tibetans to demonstrate their loyalty to the Dalai Lama, which culminated in the protests of March-April 2008, as well as with the general nervousness surrounding the forthcoming Beijing Olympics. Attempts to impose adherence to Shugden through the construction of temples and statues dedicated to the deity have met with fierce resistance from the monks, for instance in Labrang (Chin: Xiahe) in Autumn 2005, or in Ganden monastery, close to Lhasa, in March 2006. Both incidents appear to have been linked to Ganchen Lama, a prominent member of the Shugden group based in Italy, who is a frequent visitor to Tibet and Kathmandu, Nepal⁽²⁾. In early autumn 2007, groups of Tibetan Shugden followers from Tibet appeared in India, demanding from the Tibetan exile authorities that they be given access to the monasteries of Ganden Shartse and Sera Mey in South India where monks following the cult remained, quietly tolerated by their peers in order to avoid unnecessary unrest. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala saw itself compelled to issue, on 03 October 2007, a press statement outlining its position on Shugden⁽³⁾.

In December 2007, while visiting Mundgod in South India, the Dalai Lama held a speech warning that the recent activities of Shugden followers were spreading religious intolerance and thus playing into Chinese hands.

On 24 December 2007, Tau Wenching, first secretary in the Chinese embassy in India, along with his wife, visited the Tibetan settlement of Mundgod, accompanied by Thupten Palsang, also known as Nagpo Chenpo, an active member of the Shugden group and a former monk of Pomra Khamtsen [monastic college] of Sera Mey. Ensuing allegations of links between Shugden supporters and the Chinese embassy in New Delhi were repudiated by the DSDCRS, the group who organised the press conference of 28 April 2008, and dismissed as malicious propaganda by the CTA to malign them.

On 03 January 2008, the DSDCRS sent memoranda to the Indian Prime Minister, the Home Minister and the External Affairs Minister stating that the alleged ban on Shugden worship was destroying the unity of the Tibetan people and creating repercussions in Tibet. It also accused the Tibetan Reception Centre at Dharamsala of driving out the group of Tibetans who had reached there the previous autumn. The group stayed at the DSDCRS's headquarter at Chatreng Guest House in Majnu Ka Tila Tibetan settlement, Delhi.

Geshe Kunchok Gyaltsen, Vice President of the DSDCRS, who was in Italy to meet Gangchen Lama, returned to Delhi on 16 January 2008 and held a meeting with Geshe Thogmey and Chimed Tsering, other leaders of the DSDCRS, to plan their further course of action. The DSDCRS issued a "Declaration on the position of DSDCR" on 23 January 2008, and filed a civil petition in the High Court of Delhi against the alleged persecution of Shugden followers in India by the Dalai Lama and CTA. The petition was accepted and the court issued notices to the Dalai Lama, the head of CTA Samdhong Rinpoche, the central government in New Delhi and the state government of Himachal Pradesh. A date for the next hearing was set for 12 May 2008, though this has since been postponed for four months. An earlier petition on the issue filed by DSDCRS with India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) was rejected by the commission, which stated that it does not wish to interfere in spiritual matters.

In order to clarify whether or not Shugden worship should take place in the Gelugpa monasteries based in South India, the Dalai Lama called for a referendum, and a poll was held on 26-27 January and 09 February 2008. The overwhelming majority of the monks voted against allowing the Shugden cult in their monasteries.

Meanwhile, on 04 February 2008, the China Tibet Information Centre posted an article by Zhou Ren entitled: "*Religious autocracy under the cover of democracy*"⁽⁴⁾, accusing the Dalai Lama of "*forcing monks of Ganden monastery to sign pledges not to believe in Buddhist guardian Gyaicain Xudain [(Shugden)] and driving away those who refused thereby creating great disturbance among Tibetan communities and Tibetan Buddhist believers*". Describing the exclusion of dissidents as a hidden agenda behind the drive, it accused the Dalai Lama of resuming his "*former tricks*" by calling for a public vote.

Simmering tensions between the two factions in South India soon started to blow up and on 24-25 February 2008 the local police in Bylakuppe Tibetan settlement, fearing possible disturbances, prevented about 200 monks, mainly from Pomra Khamsten at Sera Mey monastery and all Shugden worshippers, from participating in a prayer festival. The other monks were issued with identity badges and only allowed entry into the prayer hall on production of these badges.

On 29 February 2008, the Dorje Shugden Society USA, issued a press release in New York, with copies sent to the Indian Prime Minister and President, alleging that the Dalai Lama was inciting the repression and persecution of Tibetans who worship Shugden. It rejected allegations that Shugden supporters received funds from Beijing and claimed the allegations were totalitarian and autocratic tactics aimed at controlling opinion.

The Shugden issue took on ethnic dimensions in the Darjeeling-Kalimpong-Sikkim region of North India on 29 March 2008 when members of the Shugden group, with the support of some regional politicians, enthroned an alternative candidate, a local boy, as the reincarnation of a deceased lama against another boy, of Tibetan descent, whose enthronement had been backed by the Dalai Lama. The dispute was also linked to the issue of who would take control of the Tharpa Choeling monastery, which has a substantial following among various local ethnic groups in the region.

In the South Indian Sera Mey monastery, 1200 out of a total of 1500 monks had backed the Dalai Lama's position on Shugden at the referendum of early 2008. However, the referendum left the two sides locked in a dispute over the use of an assembly hall, kitchen and school. As a result, the Mysore police sealed the premises on 04 April 2008 and, on 05 April, residents of Bylakuppe settlement who gathered at the monastery to offer prayers for the victims of the protests in Tibet were unable to enter. This led to protests by the Tibetan Youth Congress and the situation soon turned violent after efforts by local officials to resolve the issue failed. Finally, later on 05 April 2008, after much discussion with monks and settlement residents, the authorities allowed the majority faction to pray in the assembly hall. The Sera Mey leadership later expelled six monks of the Shugden group for inciting the crisis.

About a week before the press conference, on 22 April 2008, around 100 members of the Western Shugden Society held a demonstration outside the venue of the Dalai Lama's talk at Colgate University in Hamilton, USA. They protested against his advice to Tibetans to stop worshipping the Shugden deity. The Western Shugden Society had warned the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile in advance about its plans to hold worldwide demonstrations if the expulsion of six monks from Ganden monastery in south India was not revoked⁽⁵⁾.

Notes:

1: The Karmapa who fled in Indian exile in 2000 is the head of the Kagyupa School.

2: See: Ganden monastery reopens after Shugden clash (www.tibetinfonet.net/content/news/10178); "3/14", the new TAR party secretary, a "last ditch-struggle" and "the heads of monks and nuns" (www.tibetinfonet.net/content/update/20); Allegiance to the Dalai Lama and those who "become rich by opposing splittism" (www.tibetinfonet.net/content/update/61); Religious statues missing from monastery (www.tibetinfonet.net/content/news/10561).

3: See: CTA issues statement on Shugden followers from Tibet (www.tibetinfonet.net/content/news/10506).

4: Dalai Lama's action: Religious autocracy under cover of democracy - Zou Ren 4 Feb 08 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-02/05/content_7571870.htm

5: Letter by Western Shugden Society.

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