

## **Demographic Changes on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and their Implications**

**Speaker: Elliot Sperling, Professor, Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University**

**Chair: Patricia Uberoi, Chairperson, Institute of Chinese Studies**

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Elliot Sperling's presentation provided a brief background to the social, economic and cultural situation of Tibet in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as well as, the demographic changes which took place in Tibet during this period. These include the deterioration of the position of Buddhism in India, consequent decline of pilgrimage and reduction of trade with India. These demographic changes in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, along with its implications on the economy of Tibet, played an important role in Sino-Tibetan relations in the later centuries. It gave an increased level of importance to the Tibetan economy, especially Kham. The demographic changes that took place in Tibet were reflected in the massive migration of Tibetan population into eastern Tibet, making it the most populous part of the Plateau and the influx of Chinese into the province of Sichuan making it the most populous province of China. While pointing towards the implications of the demographic changes that took place in Tibet during 15<sup>th</sup> century, the speaker argued that the fact that the majority, albeit a slim majority, of the Tibetan population in China resides outside the territory that constitutes present-day Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), has its roots in the changes that took place in the 15th century.

He started his presentation by raising an important question i.e., what Tibet is and what the boundaries of Tibet are. As far as China is concerned, the Tibet issue is resolved, except for the rough edges which are being settled. China does not take the Tibetan exile institution called the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) seriously. The CTA maintains that Tibet is constitutive of the three traditional provinces of Kham, Amdo and U-Tsang. Further talking about the significance of 15<sup>th</sup> century Tibet, the speaker argued that the economic history of Tibet cannot be separated from its Buddhist history. The debates regarding the funding of the Tibetan monasteries have their roots in the Buddhist history of Tibet during the 15 century.

The speaker then shed light on the historical, cultural and economic aspect of Tibet in the 15 century. The significance of 15<sup>th</sup> century for Tibet also lies in the fact that this particular period marked the coming of printing press to Tibet. He called the 15<sup>th</sup> century as the age of exploration for Tibetan history. He argued that the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 was not the first voyage. Rather, the Chinese fleets were already going to the South Seas and eventually to Africa. This was relevant for Tibet because the presence of Chinese fleet in the South Seas and Ming dynasty's interests in Tibet were actually inter-linked. The same diplomacy that explored South Seas, also went to Tibet. Both the South Seas voyage and Tibetan issues were dealt by the same bureaucracy. As an aside, he pointed out how China is involved in dumping sand and land in the bordering areas of the South Seas to claim these

areas as part of China that was explored by Zheng He in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Hou Xian was one of the former envoys to Tibet who was also part of the voyage to South China Sea and sailed along with Zheng He.

Sperling argued that many changes took place during the 15<sup>th</sup> century including population change. Not only did the bulk of Tibetan population start shifting outside present-day TAR but even the Chinese population started shifting to Sichuan (facing Kham area of Tibet) making it the most populated province. He contextualized these happenings into events that took place prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. India witnessed the decline of Buddhism prior to 12<sup>th</sup> century. There are texts in Tibet which talk about the destruction of Nalanda University. As a result of the decline of Buddhism in India, there was decline in pilgrimage which in turn led to decline in trade. While commenting on the decline of trade between India and Tibet, the speaker referred to E Gene Smith, a famous Tibetologist who claimed that knowledge of Sanskrit in Tibet seemed to stagnate after around the 13<sup>th</sup> century and it only revived during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The speaker argued that the answer to these developments lies not only in the decline of Buddhism but also in the shift of economic life across the Sino-Tibetan border. The decline in pilgrimage and trade between India and Tibet made the Sino-Tibetan trade in the East extremely vibrant. According to the speaker, even according to Ming texts, Tibet was not part of Chinese territory.

The speaker commented that the changes that took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were not confined to this century alone. The foundation of these changes had been laid long before 1400 AD and their implications lasted long after 1499 AD. For instance, economic activities on the Sino-Tibetan border had started in the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries itself. 15<sup>th</sup> century is the time when it prospered.

While speaking about Sino-Tibetan relations during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the speaker argued that the Ming rulers treated Tibet as foreign China. Chinese population also migrated towards Sichuan facing Tibet.

The speaker also highlighted the trade relations between Tibet and China in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. China was in need of Tibet as a trading partner during early 15<sup>th</sup> century. He pointed out that tea and horses were the major goods of trade between the two. Tibet had horses which China needed for military purposes. As it was post-Mongol China and China's access to horses was hampered, China was dependent on Tibet for the import of horses.

He also provided data on the list of monasteries established during the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in various parts of Tibet. He pointed out that the number of new religious establishments started declining during the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Regarding the geographical location of monasteries in Tibet, he argued that major Tibetan monasteries of different sects were located in central Tibet. For instance, the various important monasteries such as Samye, Tsurphu, and other major monasteries of important sects of Tibet were in central Tibet. He commented that monasteries are not only about religion and moral teachings but they also represent the patron relations at the time of their establishment. The patrons didn't provide any funding but actually provided other valuables such as land to these

monasteries. This aspect actually played an important role in defining the changing demographics of Tibet.

The speaker also dealt with issues related to the Dalai Lama, the relative prosperity of eastern Tibet, Mongol-Tibetan relations and the 1959 revolt in Lhasa. He also highlighted how all these issues have a major imprint of the 15<sup>th</sup> century demographic changes that occurred in Tibet and its surrounding areas. He pointed out that people usually consider 1959 Lhasa revolt as the first incidence of ‘mass slaughter’. But such had taken place even before that in 1956 in Kham and in 1958 in Amdo. He concluded by commenting that changes in the religious relationship between India and Tibet led to lack of economic viability along the Indo-Tibetan frontier and an increasing economic viability along the Sino-Tibetan frontier.

## **Discussion**

Many interesting questions were raised during the ensuing discussion. These questions ranged from India-China trade during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the co-relation between Indo-Tibetan trade and Sino-Tibetan trade, and the choice of Indian and Chinese Buddhism for Tibetans to the availability of material on Indo-Tibetan trade during the past few centuries. To the question on the availability of material on Indo-Tibetan trade during 15<sup>th</sup> century, the speaker pointed out that though there is not much material available in Tibet, there are court records available in India, which is mostly anecdotal. To the question of Indian versus Chinese Buddhism, the speaker argued that many people consider Tibetan Buddhism as Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. However, as Buddhism went on a decline in India, the Tibetans came to be perceived as the esoteric Buddhist par excellence. He argued that no religion including Christianity remains the same through the ages. But Buddhism still holds legitimacy among its followers.

During the discussion, the speaker pointed out that the economic history of Tibet is a poorly studied subject. There is a dearth of material on economic geography of Tibet. And hence, immense opportunity for research.

*Report prepared by Renu Rana, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

## **About the Speaker**

Prof. Elliot Sperling is the former chair of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University. He has been a faculty member in that department’s Tibetan Studies Program since 1987. In addition to his scholarly writing on Tibetan history and Tibet’s historical and contemporary relationship with China he has provided op-ed and analytical pieces on the Tibet situation to a number of publications, including The New York Times, and The Far Eastern Economic Review.

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