

The Book Review 2006

Buddha's Warriors
Mikel Dunham
(Penguin, New Delhi, 2004)
(pp. 433 + viii; price Rs.450)

One of the joys of books is that it is the reader who determines what s/he takes from an opus. The author is like a master-chef who lays out a banquet spread of his creation; the reader takes from the offering that which takes his fancy — and each reader is at least slightly different in perception and understanding. As with any of the arts, literature becomes an interplay between the originator of the *rasa* and the *rasik*; that process creates and closes the circle of inter-personal communication. Each encounter is unique.

These thoughts struck me as I read the graphic, powerful narrative that Mikel Dunham has assembled in *Buddha's Warriors*; his identification with the Tibetan cause is complete — it is for you and me, as readers to be convinced of the arguments that he has woven. There lies the rub, at least for me.

Dunham uses the device of letting his Tibetan and other actors, interviewed in the extensive research that he carried out, speak in the direct voice, presenting quotations from their accounts in large chunks of italicized text. That makes the book readable, almost as a first person narrative, but with selected, multiple voices. But the device also leads to its own failure, in that there is nothing that resembles objective presentation of the case (though the author presents an impressive bibliography). You must buy into a single storyline.

Dunham is at his best in evoking the atmosphere of old Tibet, and in the detailed accounts the armed clashes and destruction by the Chinese rulers of new Tibet. But one must take his word that the account presented is the full picture of what actually happened; he cites very little of the Chinese perspective. Dunham presents a gripping account of the Tibetan resistance, and the character of the people of Kham, Amdo and Golok regions of Eastern Tibet who provided the backbone of resistance. He notes also the contempt that these fighters held for Lhasa politics within the entourage of the Dalai Lama and some of its personalities; Dunham juxtaposes this against the simple faith of these fiercely independent warriors. This is a romantic perspective; relying on the memory of the diaspora that the author interviews, besides the CIA handlers of the Tibetan fighters, means also that inconvenient events are air-brushed away; we only remember that which we wish, such memory does not produce historical accuracy.

The author is at his weakest in his simplistic essays into political analysis of the actions of other countries, notably the US, UK, and of course India. He is especially harsh in his estimation of Nehru and of India's motivation. He refers to the India-China boundary dispute, but fails to see the real connection between New Delhi's estimation of the Tibet issue and its profound concerns over the border; it is easy to speak of Nehru's errors in hindsight, but the complexity of Indian concerns are not even remotely understood by the author. For instance, writing of President Kennedy's reluctance to resume CIA air-supplies to rebels in Mustang in 1961 without India's backing (Eisenhower had suspended these when the Gary Powers U-2 aircraft was shot down on May 1, 1960), he writes of 'Nehru's sycophantic relationship with

China’ — this willfully ignores the real concerns that motivated New Delhi’s prudence.

That China’s policy in Tibet was a huge tragedy is not in question. Tibet’s autonomy and quasi-independence, implicit in the British notion that it was under China’s ‘suzerainty’, clashed headlong with the resurgence of Chinese nationalism following Mao’s triumph over the KMT in 1949. The suzerainty concept represented what Sugata Bose has called ‘layered sovereignty’ (see *A Hundred Horizons* (2005)), where an entity could acknowledge a superior authority and yet remain autonomous in its own territory. But such notions could not survive the assertiveness of new states, which viewed the extension of their authority to the very limits of their claimed borders as essential acts of statehood. The incorporation of Tibet into the Chinese body politic was ordained in the very fact of China’s resurgence. This is what Nehru understood, because independent India had that same self-image of sovereign authority.

The Tibetan exiles who have made their home in India and in other parts of the world, cling to their own myths, and like all long-term exiles, over time they have developed their own vested interests; a return to Tibet through compromise with China is not germane any longer to most of them. Dunham observes that the places where Tibetan exiles live in India and Nepal ‘bear an eerie resemblance to the dismal reservations allotted to Native Americans’. Dunham overlooks the conditions of much greater deprivation in which the citizens of these countries live, as neighbors to their Tibetan guests. A simple fact: the Tibetans in Dharamsala and elsewhere have now become fat-cats, thriving on the bountiful foreign aid bestowed on them, lording it over the local inhabitants.

Dunham casually picks up one of the myths of the kind that exiles often favor — that these Tibetan administrators are a ‘government-in-exile’. No one recognizes such a government; it is an abuse of the shelter that India has given to the Dalai Lama and his entourage, and to the ordinary refugees, that the Tibetans hierarchy should cling to such a fiction.

Anyone looking for a balanced account of Tibet might consider Patrick French’s *Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land* (2004). Written by a former head of the Tibet Committee in the UK (very well disposed to the Tibetan cause, he quit the Committee after writing this book), it is based on a yearlong visit to Tibet; French comes to the conclusion that Tibet’s future is bound with that of China, and that Western activists, and the exiles, have perhaps even harmed the Tibetan people.

The Dalai Lama has observed, quoted by Dunham at the very end of his book, that the tragedy of Tibet has been a blessing in disguise; its religion has taken root all over the world. This is not a small achievement, when we consider the world’s ignorance of Tibet in 1950, the time when Tibet was forced to move out of its isolation.

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