

Chapter V

A tale of four cities: Geopolitics and grand-narrative

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Abstract: This chapter explores the geopolitical, cultural, and historical trajectories of four Himalayan capital cities: Lhasa, Thimphu, Kathmandu, and Gangtok. Through the lens of geopolitics and grand narratives, the chapter examines how these cities have been shaped by their unique cultural identities and the disruptive forces of history. Lhasa, in particular, serves as a focal point for the impact of Chinese occupation and the resulting cultural erasure through policies of "Sinicization." The chapter further delves into the environmental challenges faced by these cities, exacerbated by climate change and development projects. By comparing these capitals, the chapter highlights both the similarities and differences in their historical paths and modern struggles, offering insight into how politics, culture, and geography intertwine in the Himalayas.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Lhasa, Sinicization, Himalayan Capitals, Cultural Erasure

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So, what I have for you is a tale of four cities, which involves geography, geopolitics, and grand narratives. Yes. And while I was getting ready with this presentation and preparing these slides, I realized that Dickens was enormously intelligent to restrict his quest to the tale of two cities. It is mighty impossible to accommodate five or four cities in one presentation. And chances are I'll talk in detail about one and perhaps two and throw in a third if I have time.

And if I don't have time, in any case, this is not information that is not readily available. The point is that sometimes we are so caught up in our own lives that we don't necessarily reach out to things that are quite readily accessible. So, here I have the four cities represented through some iconic images.

This happens to be the Puttula Palace in Lhasa. And the next image I have here, if you can see the cursor there, is of the Buddha Park at Ravangla Gangtok. This is the Darbar Square of Kathmandu. And this, of course, is an aerial view of the lovely city of Thimphu. You can't necessarily see everything that is here. So, what you also have in this visual is this little image of the Tashikoi Dzongdha in Thimphu, which is not necessarily visible, but it's here. Okay, so let's get started with the presentation.

And what exactly is the reason for me behind making this presentation? Yes, I come from the mountains. I grew up in Shimla. We saw acute water scarcity for the summer months. There was a distinct time when we had to fetch water from the Baudi in the Shiv Temple, because we had no water supply for 28 days. So, one has lived through all of that. And I could completely identify with the narratives put before us by the speakers before me.

However, I'm looking at the big picture. It's like looking at the big history of the Himalayas in a certain sense, if I may. And here we are. So, yes, so this is a tale of four cities. Like I said, this is still a project in proposition. It is not a product of a research already done. But I do feel that these are important questions and they need to be taken up. So, the object here is to trace the trajectories of the narratives of these four capitals. One of them happens to be a state capital. Three of them happen to be capitals of countries. Okay, not countries anymore, because one is the capital of Tibet, the Tibet Autonomous Region, which is now part of China. So, yeah, state, country, capitals, two and two divide that way. Okay. And these happen to be geographically

adjacent and culturally contiguous territories in the Himalayas, in the high Himalayas as such. And as such, by virtue of being capital cities, they represent the quintessential identities of their territories.

The purpose of this presentation is to record the moments of the deeply disruptive anthropomorphic departures in terms of historical, geopolitical and military events that have impacted their very different struggles and outcomes, both in terms of natural habitats and cultural bios and landscapes. So, we are looking at these four cities and the idea is to just look at their outcomes and how they are different, and yet how they are frightfully, frightfully still so similar. So, the capitals under contemplation, like I said, are Lhasa, Thimphu, Gangtok and Kathmandu.

Two of these mountain capital cities, Kathmandu and Lhasa, have a very well-documented history and a fairly ancient kind of past, which also saddles them with a huge baggage, in more ways than one would want to imagine. So, you have the earliest recorded references to both Lhasa and Kathmandu, appearing as early as the 2nd AD. And when you look at these cities in all there, you know, colours and complexities, you look at them as representative signatures of their respective states, bearing both marks and scars of their sometimes isolated, sometimes contiguous and sometimes intersecting histories.

Their outcomes today are different and they are also curiously similar and perhaps that is the need which triggers this momentum to look at them together as a contiguously cohesive sort of geographical space. So, yeah, I don't have too many images. I took them out at the last moment because they take too much time and space. Do I want to just clarify something here? This is still a project in contemplation, like I said. All the referencing is not in place, so please just bear with me. Once the paper is ready, I'll share it, but right now this is just random information, inadequately referenced, so please bear that in mind.

So, we come to Lhasa first. Lhasa happens to be this beautiful semi-arid Himalayan desert of sorts. It is technically, the word Lhasa translates into abode of gods. It also is referred to as the forbidden city. It is the erstwhile capital of Tibet and now happens to be the urban center of the Tibet autonomous region, Dar, and is referred to as a prefecture-level city within the Chinese dispensation. At 11,900 feet, it is literally the highest city in the world and its population is 9.02 lakhs.

Of course, there are various kinds of figures that emerge about the population and the composition of the demographics as such, and that is because it is differently represented by the Chinese dispensation as opposed to the Tibetan government, which works in exile from Dharamsala. So, you have different versions of the exact breakdown of this figure that we keep

getting. So, Lhasa has been the religious and administrative capital of Tibet since the 17th century.

It has had a rich history, a massive influence. There is the Putula Palace, there is Jorkhang Temple and Norbulingka Palace, and all of these palaces, in a certain sense, enshrine the wonderful, enormously interesting, essentially Buddhist history of the place. So, this has been the seat of the Tibetan empire since the 7th century with the emperor Sosen Gampo.

It wasn't the political centre for quite some time from, let's say, the 9th century till about the 11th century. It was only around that time when the 5th Dalai Lama ascended and made this, yet again, the capital of Tibet. And, of course, he is credited with unifying all Tibet. But even when it hasn't been the political centre, it has always remained an important religious site. It has also always remained an important trade site and it has been this consistently important destination on the Silk Route that many of us are familiar with. Okay.

So, there are, of course, origin stories. There is the Padmasambhava legend, in terms of which Padmasambhava actually killed a demon. And because the demon was killed on this land, this land became holy and so on and so forth. So, we have all those factors. Plus, we also have the fact that several other communities have been part of this territory for a very, very long time. Islam, for instance, has existed in this place since the 11th century.

So, you have the 5th Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso, who reunited Tibet, moved the capital back to Lhasa. I'm sorry, I think I moved the slide slightly differently. Yeah. So, like I just said, it remained an important destination on the Silk Route with flourishing trade and commerce. Okay. So, so much so that towards the end of the century, 17th century, there was the Lhasa Barcode, which was a local sort of trading unit or the trading space, which became this bustling market space for foreign goods.

And Ippolito Desideri, the Italian Jesuit missionary, in 1716, wrote about its necessarily cosmopolitan nature. He talked about how there was so much trade happening here. He also talked about this very integrated, varied demographic of this place, with Mongol populations, Chinese populations, Muscovites, Armenians, Kashmiris, and Indian origin citizens. The exports from this place were usually of gold, tusks, fur etc. all along the route, for that matter. And the imports basically had to do with saffron tea, Mediterranean corals, etc., and Persian turquoise. So, yes, throughout, you know, let's say, the 17th century, 18th century, and so on, this was this extremely flourishing place.

Then comes the mid-18th century, when King Hualong, the emperor of China, invaded this territory, okay, and demolished the monastic orders, sort of tortured several leaders, etc., etc. And that has been, unfortunately, the unhappy history of Tibet forever, almost, because the

Chinese and Tibetan contention is not a new thing. It has existed throughout history, throughout recorded history, for that matter. So, in early part of the 20th century, there is this British expedition to Tibet, and what comes out of it is a convention document between Britain and Tibet, wherein Tibet is supposed to be, sort of, annexed to British empire in this region. However, please excuse me, yeah, soon after, in 1912, this document is repudiated and replaced by the Anglo-Chinese treaties of 1912. Okay, and this is when King's troops leave Lhasa and retreat back to China.

Okay, so from the beginning of the 20th century, let's say 1912, and after that, once this place is formally part of the British interest in the subcontinent region, again, an era of prosperity begins here. Okay, so you have one of the travellers in those times, Henry who writes about Lhasa and talks about how there is nothing that one cannot buy here, or at least order. Okay, so from things like Elizabeth Arden's specialties to sewing machines, radio sets, gramophones, and records of all kinds, everything is available.

So, this continues till about the 1950s, when you have the crackdown by the People's Liberation Army in the 1950s, and this invasion is met by, of course, you have the counter-revolution in China, the cultural revolution, and finally you have this invasion of the Tibetan region. And this leads to an uprising in Lhasa, eventually in 1959, which is met with an incredibly brutal crackdown. So, this is when Dalai Lama, the current Dalai Lama of that time, and the other officials dispensing the governance in this area had to flee this place.

And after the overtaking of this territory, once again, by the PLA, something different begins to emerge here. The trade and business were immediately sort of destroyed, and instead of a flourishing trading business economy, what you have here is, you know, the establishing of Chinese government shops which sell meagre rations at very, sort of, strange prices, etc, etc. And the entire community, in a certain sense, is pushed back into the previous century.

So, the current Dalai Lama at, sorry, yeah, this was at a 1959 press conference in Mussoorie when he stated that the ultimate Chinese aim with regard to Tibet, you know, in his opinion, was to exterminate religion and culture, and even the absorption of the Tibetan race. So, there is Chinese civilian and military presence in Tibet, according to him in this lecture that he delivered at Mussoorie. And he talks about how there are some five million Chinese settlers who are in this region, and so on, and how many Tibetans have been deported.

And what you have occurring here, in his opinion, is a complete absorption of the Tibetans as a race. And he calls it the Sinicization of Tibet, and he accuses the Chinese authorities of third-degree genocide. And of course, there is no depth of readings available on how exactly this

genocide works, according to sources connected with the independent movement for Tibet, and the government of Tibetan exile between, let's say, the late 50s and the early 80s.

The Chinese government probably killed off 1.2 million Tibetans in the area. So, we have another critic researching this area, and so on. So, another Tibetologist, Jane Ardley, claimed in her book, *Tibet, Religion, Resistance, and the State*, and this was, I think, 2002, correct? So, in 2002, in her book, she claimed that with the coming of the Cultural Revolution, the economy of Tibet was completely devastated, and there was also a systematic attempt at destroying Tibet's cultural heritage.

Yes, it is true that the chief, you know, iconic sites of Buddhist religion in Lhasa were allowed to remain. However, according to her, some 6,000 small monasteries were destroyed all over Tibet, and some 600,000 monks and nuns were killed, or they simply disappeared, or they were imprisoned, and this happened in the Chinese dispensation following the Cultural Revolution and its impact on Tibet. So, through the 80s, because of the Tibetan government in exile, and so on and so forth, there was this drumming of support of the international community in favor of Tibet.

There were statements by U.S. leaders, there were resolutions in the U.N., and Hu Jintao, who was at that point of time in charge of the Tibetan region, was placed in a very strange sort of situation. He had taken a more moderate liberal position vis-a-vis Tibet for quite some time, but this kind of international pressure to somehow achieve independence for Tibet had the absolutely opposite effect. What it ultimately resulted in was Hu Jintao taking the more hardline position vis-a-vis Tibet.

So, this has happened through the 80s, 90s, and so on. In 2008, there was this massive Tibetan uprising, a sort of formal uprising according to Tibetan media, and just called a kind of riot by the Chinese media. So, 2008 saw this massive uprising, but ultimately it came to nothing. The other thing is that after the 2000s, especially in the current decade, that is, no, in the previous decade for instance, the rising influence of China has made it more and more difficult for people to articulate freely about Tibet. So, in fact, just yesterday we had Tenzing Sundu with us, and I have never seen Sundu as contemplative, as restrained as I saw him yesterday. Of course, it could just be the nature of the medium as such, but at least I thought there was this sort of holding back, which I could only attribute to certain sort of powers that one can't really control right now.

So, like I said before, there is the cynicization or the Chinese, you know, the conversion of Tibet to a more Chinese-oriented identity in Tibet, and as I perhaps mentioned before, this is

being attempted through third degree genocide. A third-degree genocide is very simple. In a third-degree genocide, you don't necessarily have people being actively killed.

Of course, in this case, there is this kind of periodic democide of Tibetan people, which happens all the time, but in a third-degree genocide, what happens is that the original inhabitants of a territory are swarmed by outsiders to a degree where they become minorities in their own territory, and once they become minorities, it is easy to sort of systematically ignore them in terms of politics, governmental policy programs, etc., etc. So, this is what has been happening in Tibet. So, there is demographic aggression, as has been pointed out by many of the pro-Free Tibet movement enthusiasts, okay, and Tibetans have been reduced to a minority in their homeland.

Now, the point is that the whole issue of the demographic composition of Tibet, and especially Lhasa, is hugely problematic because you get varying figures from different sources. You have Chinese suggesting that you might have a migrant Han population moving in and out of Lhasa and in and out of Tibet, largely, but they're only there for work, and if work were not to be available for them, they would not be there in the first place. But they still assert that the majority population within the autonomous region of Tibet is still of Tibetans.

The pro-Tibet movement points out that Tibetans ultimately occupy the far-flung regions of this place and the centre, Lhasa, and all the important resources of the territory. For instance, the sort of adjoining areas of Lhasa has very rich copper deposits, etc., etc. So, all those resources are actively appropriated by the Chinese people, and so on.

Not just this, there is also this whole effort to bring in some kind of development and bring in some kind of change which is, according to Tibetans, happening at their cost. Their rivers are being forcibly diverted, and you have the railway connection going right into the heart of Tibet, right up to Lhasa, which further yokes this whole region with its capital to the Chinese sort of dispensation. So, you have all of that happening, plus, of course, there is a huge army garrison outside Lhasa.

So, what you have is, you have Tibetans who are subordinated, marginalized within this territory, and even if their numbers remain what they do, and the numbers vary according to the sources that you consult. There is this sort of discourse and counter-discourse in terms of what exactly is happening here, and as China gains prominence in terms of its international standing and in terms of its power, political and otherwise, you have more and more people speaking on behalf of China and discrediting the pro-independence movement completely. So, you have Barry Sotman, who happens to be a professor of political science teaching at Hong Kong.

He's not a Tibetologist, he doesn't speak Tibetan, he doesn't know much about Tibetan people, but he writes about them anyway. Okay, so he talks about how there is this attempt to conduct a kind of ethnic cleansing of the Han population within this territory, and he also accuses the Dalai Lama of constantly and consistently misrepresenting situations vis-a-vis the Han majority as such. Okay, and he simply says you have Tibetans in the countryside, and that is where three-fourths of the population lives, and most of them are there.

So, it's not as if they are a minority, but even if they are a majority, if they do not necessarily have any say in the political dispensation in terms of how projects are imposed on them, in terms of how the whole model of progress in a certain sense works here, it doesn't really matter if they're not technically a minority here. So, Barry Sotman has made some fairly strong claims vis-a-vis this, and he talks about how the settlers who come from outside, especially the Hans and the Hui populations, they're not necessarily subsidized by the Chinese state, and when you talk of the Tibetans, the Tibetans are not necessarily subjected to certain policies. For instance, the one-child policy that applies to the Hans, for instance, that is not what the Tibetans are subjected to, and he also asserts that yeah, so you have Tibetans who are not necessarily a minority here, they're definitely not an underclass, there is a substantial Tibetan middle class, etc., which is involved with the government sector, tourism, commerce, etc.

So, this is an assertion that comes from people like Sotman, and then you have other people who talk in the same way, and one of such people happens to be Colin Macerac, and Colin Macerac is a serious voice that has to be heeded, because he actually writes for the UNHCR, and in his opinion, the Tibetan genocide has to be regarded as a deep genocide, 1.2 million people did not die, 400,000 people did not die this year, nothing happened, okay. And he emphasizes the positives of the Chinese intervention in this territory, he emphasizes the modernity, the better infrastructure, the lowered infant and maternity mortality rates, etc., etc., and the fact that there has been a consistent increase in population. So, that is the model that the Chinese government obviously wants to project here, while it claims that the Tibetan rulers and the dispensations of the earlier times, whether monarchs or the theocratic monastic dispensations, his assertion is that they have been horribly oppressive, and this is their attempt to free the people of Tibet.

One huge marker of this project for freedom of Tibet, in Chinese opinion, happens to be the Qinghai-Tibet railway line, which became operative in 2006. So, you have this railway line, which makes it easier for people from England to travel right into Tibet, and the whole point of how you just have migrant labor coming into this territory, etc., etc., nobody needs to feel threatened by it, is a very fallacious kind of argument, because that is precisely how, you know,

the Chinese dispensation works. I mean, wherever they take projects, they take their workers, they take everything they need with them, okay.

So, whether it is them building stuff in Sri Lanka or anywhere, it never really helps those territories, okay. The only thing they actually incur is huge debt, and they have some infrastructure in place, but that infrastructure has not really ever helped the local population ever. So, this is the political question as such within Lhasa, within Tibet, okay.

And then, of course, there are other calamities which keep the following this place. Since 2016, there have been a sort of, you know, there has been this sort of relentless onslaught of natural calamities in this region. And, of course, when we talk of Lhasa, the highest capital out there, when we talk of Tibet, literally the roof of the world, and then we look at the kind of enormous calamities that have befallen this region since 2016.

So, there is the impact of climate change on the Tibetan plateau itself. So, there is torrential rainfall reported across the territory. There is this drastic climatic shift, which results in high frequency of floods, landslides, mudslides, etc., etc. The latest was in 2018, the landslides and mudslides, which blocked the Chengdu-Lhasa Highway. Now, when it comes to these alarming kinds of developments in terms of what has happened in this territory, the Chinese government actually makes the changes to the general deterioration of the Himalayan region, whereas counterfeiting blames the aggressive development projects and the policy for the whole situation in Tibet. So, this is my offering on Tibet that I have here.

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