

## Entangled in Regional Geopolitics - Tibetans in the Special Frontier Force of India

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*The Special Frontier Force (S.F.F.) was raised by the Intelligence Bureau of India in the immediate aftermath of the Indo China war of 1962. Initially composed of Tibetan youths, it was known as the Establishment 22. Records indicate that it was raised by India in coordination with US intelligence Agency, the C.I.A. and with full endorsement of Washington. The force was trained by C.I.A., among other things to collect intelligence from across India's China border with the help of electronic devices. The C.I.A. patronage was gradually withdrawn after 1964. In India, the force was commissioned to action in Chittagong Hill tracts in 1971, on the eve of Indo Pakistan War over Bangladesh issue. Later they took part in Operation Bluestar in Punjab and fought in the war of Kargil in 1999. Their activities and operations had so far been kept under total secret. Recently they were employed by the Government of India in the border faceoff with China in Ladakh in August 2020. The death of Nyima Tenzin of S.S.F. turned the spotlight on them and their sacrifice was highlighted. The importance of the S.F.F. in India's security set up has to be understood in the context of the regional geopolitics and India's Tibet policy. The force was raised in the era of Cold war when the C.I.A. was helping the Tibetan resistant warriors, the Chushi Gandruk, fighting from Mustang in Nepal. India, too was ready to help them even if covertly, to get back Tibet's political status. Raising of the force gave not only a job opportunity to the Tibetan refugee youths but served their nationalist aspirations and suited India's need of a trained mountain force post 1962 to combat China in the Himalayan region. But following the withdrawal of the C.I.A., Sino US rapprochement in the 1970s and the subsequent end of the Cold War, the priorities changed in the US and India's policy towards China also went through several phases. The recent deterioration of relations with China has once again brought Tibetan issue to the limelight. India's recognition of the S.F.F. actions in the war indicates how India, in order to put pressure on China is giving space to the Tibetan CTA (The Government in Exile, in India) and the Tibetans in S.F.F. The Tibetans have not been able to achieve independence but they are now being used in the political rivalry of the two regional powers.*

### Introduction

The Special Frontier Force of India, composed basically of Tibetan refugee youths, was formed in 1962 and it continues to be an elite military force in the high altitudes of the Himalayas. History of this force is multi-dimensional and has to be understood in the particular historical context of the period. The International political scenario of this era of Cold War, geo politics of the region

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and India's own security concerns born out of military vulnerability vis a vis China provided the rationale behind the formation of this special armed force. Inherent in the history of this force is also the gradual evolution of India's Tibet policy.

After maintaining a policy of non-interference in Sino Tibetan relations in the 1950s when newly emerged Communist China asserted political supremacy over Tibet, independent India under P.M. Jawaharlal Nehru actually tried to develop friendly ties with China on the basis of the concept of *Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*, i.e., Sino Indian brotherhood and the Buddhist principles of *Panchsheel*. The relations changed drastically when, following an uprising against the Chinese in Lhasa in March 1959, India opened her doors to the Dalai Lama when He fled His motherland followed by about 80,000 refugees from Tibet. Accepting Dalai Lama as an honoured guest on humanitarian grounds, India allowed Him to settle down in India with his countrymen and even to set up His Government in Exile. Policies were undertaken to allot lands for Tibetan refugee settlements, arrange jobs for the refugees and setting up of schools for the children. China was naturally irked by the developments and these, coupled with the border problems culminated into the 1962 Sino Indian war. Unprepared for the turn of events, India was badly thrashed in the war. Regarded as a foreign policy failure with far reaching consequences, this brought about a fundamental change in India's security concerns. The raising of the S.F.F. has to be placed in this political context.

At another level, in this period of Cold War in a bipolar world, the relation between the U.S. and Communist China was at its worst. U.S. through its intelligence agencies naturally kept an eye on the anti-Chinese uprisings in parts of Tibet and even began to assist those rebels fighting for independence of their homeland. C.I.A had already become involved in the fight.

The US and the Indian interests converged to some extent in this. Both the Tibetan rebel forces and the S.F.F. raised by India to combat the Chinese in high altitude if need be, initially received assistance and training from the C.I.A. This joint action did not last long. With the changing geo political scenario and improvement of relations with China, the C.I.A. gradually withdrew from the project of assisting Tibetan resistance movement, and India's sending of the S.F.F to Tibet for direct confrontation with China became a distant probability. The political contexts have changed but its very existence and status remain as a chapter in the history of regional geo politics of that period as a reminder of how India has tried to use the Tibetans in her relations with China.

### **Raising of the Force - The Political Context: National and International**

The Special Frontier Force (S.F.F.) composed basically of Tibetan refugees in India, also known as Establishment 22 and Vikas Regiment is a part of the Indian

armed force but with a difference. This difference originates from the circumstances under which it was raised as well as the objectives that it was expected to pursue. From the very beginning it maintained a distinct identity of its own and was different from the Indian armed forces in terms of both its composition as well as the special training they received from the Indian Intelligence Department and to some extent from C.I.A. (Central Intelligence Agency that is regarded as the World's premier foreign intelligence agency vital to the U.S. national security) In order to understand why it was so, one has to turn to the international politics of the Cold War era, U.S involvement in Sino Tibetan relations as well as the geopolitics of South Asia and India's Tibet policy - shaped by India's relations with China. It was the interplay of all these forces that invited direct intervention of CIA and the formation of the SFF in 1962 as an extension of Tibet policy of both India and the USA. C.I.A.'s involvement started with interest in Tibetan resistance movement to China.

The US interest in Tibetan resistance movement originated in the 1950s when following the defeat of the Kuomintang in the Civil War in China the People's Republic of China (PRC) was set up under the leadership of Mao tse Tung. This also brought about a change in Sino Tibet relation as PRC made an open declaration of bringing Tibet under its control and the Seventeen Point Agreement was also signed by Tibet.<sup>1</sup> The gradual extension of Chinese authority to Tibet through takeover of the villages of Kham in Eastern Tibet had already given rise to a series of independent uprisings from 1949 onwards. These protests were often coordinated by local families and monastic leaders and gradually intensified and eventually entered Lhasa. The rebels finally decided to unite their separate citizen soldiers into a voluntary army and took the name of *Chusi Gandrung* in reference to the four rivers and six ranges of Kham. *Chusi Gandrung* had its inaugural ceremony in Lhoke region, south of Lhasa in 1958. Gompo Tashi, an eminent businessman in Lhasa took the initiative to coordinate the fighters.<sup>2</sup>

The resistance movement against China drew the attention of the C.I.A. itself. The U.S government had already taken notice of Communist China's policy towards Tibet and even offered help to the Tibetan government after invasion by China in 1950. Now with the situation taking a turn towards open confrontation, the Tibetans requested the U.S for military aid in 1955. In the summer of 1956 C.I.A. opened its Far Eastern Division and decided to support the resistance movement. An initial group of six Tibetan resistance fighters were trained for

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1. Communist China launched an attack against Tibet on October 7, 1950 Tibet surrendered and the subsequent negotiation resulted in the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement in 1951. The circumstances under which Tibet signed it, however is a matter of controversy. The agreement brought about some far reaching reforms of Tibetan government and gave rise to resentments that ultimately culminated into a revolt in 1959 leading to the flight of the Dalai Lama.

2. For some details of the movement see Michael Harris Goodman, *The Last Dalai Lama: A Biography*, Rupa & Co. 1996, pp. 253-264, chapter 18, 'Four rivers, six ranges.'

four months in map reading and radio transmissions in the island of Saipan in North Pacific. Then they were given training in parachute jumping in an island that they believed to be Philippines<sup>3</sup> and then airdropped in Tibet. The secret training of Tibetans continued in U.S. first in Virginia and then from 1958 onwards in secret Camp Hale in Colorado.<sup>4</sup> Thus the history of the Tibetan resistance movement became a part of the broader history of the Cold War in South Asia. Tibet became an important component in U.S. Cold War strategy in Asia. As in the previous century, Tibet remained a 'pawn in the imperial chessboard'. The U.S and also India emerged as the key players. By 1958 C.I.A. backed by the U.S State and Defence Departments had become fully committed to support the Tibetan resistance movement. More than 500,000 pounds, and 250 tons of equipment, both arms, ammunitions and medical supplies were dropped by the C.I.A. to the resistance force from 1957-1961.<sup>5</sup>

With the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 many *Chusi Gangdrug* units too also shifted to India and took up jobs in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Later on, under the leadership of Gompo Tashi and Gyalo Thondup, one of Dalai Lama's elder brothers, almost 200 leaders and 3000 soldiers met in Kalimpong where they decided to move out of India and set up operations in Mustang in Nepal. Mustang was a territorial enclave extending into Tibet some 350 miles southwest of Lhasa. Even though it was nominally under Nepal it was ruled by a king who had Tibetan ancestry and practised Buddhism. Gompo Tashi was familiar with the area and had travelled several times to that place for trading purpose. Selection of this place was approved by both the C.I.A. and Gyalo Thondup. India was also aware of the developments. U.S even provided training to men who were chosen as leaders and some recruits received training in India itself before leaving for Mustang. In Mustang the C.I.A. trained guerrillas provided training to other soldiers.

Two airdrops of supplies consisting of arms, ammunitions and food were made in 1962 and 1965. Later on C.I.A. even provided financial support to the resistance movement via the intelligence headquarters in Delhi. In fact, India too became involved in the operations particularly since the war with China in 1962. In fact it was at this juncture that India took the decision to directly recruit Tibetans in the Indian armed forces for defence of border in the Himalayan region. This force was the Special Frontier Force. The decision was taken with full support of the C.I.A. that agreed to provide them some training. The history of the guerrilla fighters of *Chusi Gandrug* and the origin of the S.F.F. are interconnected, the common factors being the resistance against China's takeover of Tibet. The U.S.

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3. Ibid, p. 261.

4. Ibid, Chapter 19, End of an era, pp. 267-278. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, University Press of Kansas, 2002 is a detailed history of CIA's role in Tibetan resistance movement.

5. John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War; America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival*, BBS Public Affairs, New York, 1999, p. 155.

and the Indian interests converged due to the Geo political realities of this Cold War era.

India's Tibet policy was determined by her own national security interests and went through some changes in accordance with her relations with China.

After India's independence (1947) the subcontinent was partitioned. Both India and Pakistan had their own problems and war had also broken out between the two over the issue of Kashmir. Pakistan was first closely linked with the U.S and later with China. India did not openly join any camp and apparently proclaimed Nonaligned status. In reality initially she coveted both the U.S and Soviet Union at least till the 1970s. Prime Minister Nehru, eager to maintain good relations with China was unwilling to openly criticize China before 1959 over its Tibet policy, Nehru repeatedly advised the Dalai Lama to practice patience and wanted to follow a policy of non-interference. When Dalai Lama visited India on occasion of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of the Buddha in 1956, Chou En-lai also happened to be on a state visit to India. Dalai Lama had personal meetings with both the leaders and was assured by Chou of no drastic action in Tibet. Disturbed by the critical and fast deteriorating situation in Tibet arising from the Seventeen Point Agreement, He had been advised by many to stay back in Tibet but when the situation was explained to Nehru, the latter advised him to return back on the basis of the assurances given by Chou. Rather he advised him and his brother Gyalo Thondup to go for a democratic movement as a legitimate alternative.<sup>6</sup> In 1959 when the Dalai Lama took refuge in India He was accepted as an honoured guest and India allowed him to run the Government in Exile from Indian soil and provided all assistance to rehabilitate the Tibetan refugees who had followed Him. It was basically on humanitarian ground - India clarified. India however took a soft stand towards the guerrilla fighters of the resistance movement in India. Even though they were not allowed to cross the border into Tibet, India was aware of how they were regrouping themselves for a new fight from Mustang and the interest that C.I.A took in helping them.

The year 1962 was to make a significant change in the mode of US as well as Indian support for the Tibetan resistance. As a result of the border wars between India and China, India became a major partner of the Tibetan resistance movement against China.

Before the border confrontation with China, Nehru had given the control of all border activities to Mullik, head of the Intelligence, an authority that he retained from 1951 to October 1959. By 1959 Mullik had created 67 check posts along the frontier stretching over 2000 miles by a staff of 1,334 employees trained in Tibetan and Chinese and capable of decoding Chinese communication in southern Tibet. After that Indian army was excluded from the Himalayan border areas, as its primary mission became the defence against Pakistan. The defence of the North Eastern Frontier Agency or N.E.F.A. in short, (present Arunachal

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6. M. H. Goodman, op cit. Chapter 17, "A special sort of gentleness", pp. 239-251.

Pradesh, the North Eastern state of India, through which the MacMahon Line passes and the border dispute with China exists) was entrusted to the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force under the Minister of External Affairs. Unprepared to face the Chinese assault, India was badly thrashed in the war in 1962.<sup>7</sup> Nehru was severely criticised for a failed Foreign policy with regard to China and felt betrayed.

When the India China conflict broke out the U.S.A. was preoccupied with the Cuban crisis and it was only after the Russian withdrawal that U.S.A. turned attention to India. On November 19<sup>th</sup> Kennedy responded to Nehru's desperate call for help by offering to send a high level mission to assess what the U.S. could do to help India. Even though China declared ceasefire on December 1 a U.S. mission headed by one of America's most distinguished politicians and diplomat Averil Hardiman was on its way within a day.

In an analysis of the Sino India conflict it was noted that 'continued strengthening of the Indian defensive position and possible disruption of Chinese supply lines through guerrilla activities were the primary means of denying this area of Peiping's political -military penetration, short of escalating the conflict into a major war.'<sup>8</sup> This strategy was generally accepted by both the countries. Washington and London would provide bulk of military hardware to restore India's military establishment. It was also decided that C.I.A. would develop an on the ground intelligence collection capability to determine Chinese strengths and weaknesses inside Tibet to be exploited by the guerrilla action. The Tibetans who would now carry out these missions would be trained at Camp Hale. C.I.A. would also continue its support to the force that had come into being under its patronage in Mustang.

In a separate programme, a new force was to be created in India by Mullik to guard India's Northern border and C.I.A. would provide logistical and training support to that paramilitary force. Unlike the Mustang force, this new force was to remain solely under Indian direction.<sup>9</sup>

Even though actually formed after 1962, it appears that Major General Uban the commander of India's Twenty Second Mountain Regiment during World War II had already contemplated raising a troop with the Tibetan refugees a year before 1962. 'One year before', he said,

"I had made a tour of the border, - almost all of it on foot - and in the process had ruminated on our vulnerability up there. And while on this trek, the thought occurred to me that we should have some Tibetans stationed with our border patrol. There were already thousands of Tibetan exiles inside the Indian border with nothing to do. I thought "If you leave these warriors alone, they'll probably do some mischief. The

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7. John Kenneth Knaus, *op cit*, p. 250.

8. Memorandum for Secretary Rusk, November 17, 1962, Hilsman papers, Sino Indian border clash 1962, box 1, folder18, Kennedy Library. Quoted by John Kenneth Knaus, *ibid*, p. 265.

9. John Kenneth Knaus, *ibid*, pp. 265-66.

best answer is to hire them, get them in shape and anyway, the Indo Tibetan border is the most crucial point of our dispute with China. We must have some people belonging to that area, so that they can inform us and deliver valuable information to us.”<sup>10</sup>

This new force was the Tibetan manned Special Frontier Force officially created by Mullik on 14 November 1962. An all-Tibetan force, it was popularly known as “Establishment 22.” A name given to it by Commander Major General Uban.<sup>11</sup> When word got around, the Tibetan refugees flocked in Dehradun from there to be transported to S.F.F. home base in the Himalayas 120 miles from Tibet. Gyalo Thondup too was involved in the project. He said that until 1962 India had consistently rejected his appeals to train Tibetans as resistance fighters inside Tibet, but now, the attitude changed dramatically. He was summoned to New Delhi where he worked out an agreement with Mullik and K.L. Mehta of External Ministry to encourage Tibetans to join S.F.F. They wanted 6000 troops but eventually ended up training a force twice that number. The call actually provided an opportunity for young men who had not been able to join the Mustang contingent and yet remained committed to serve the motherland. Within a month, 6000 Tibetan men, mostly soldiers from the Tibetan army, the Dalai Lama’s bodyguards, and resistance fighters volunteered. The recruits were happy to be trained and eager to fight. The organisation was designed to be an ultra secret department within the Indian armed forces that continues to be so till this day. Like the earlier Tibetan resistance fighters, the new recruits to Establishment 22 were true patriots who never thought of the consequences for themselves’, he wrote.<sup>12</sup> Half of these men were more than 45 years of age, and some were even near sixty. The chief political leader Jamba Kalden was 43. The older generation were itching for a final showdown with the Chinese and had managed to edge out the younger candidates.<sup>13</sup> Later they were joined by two companies of women who were given six months of basic training identical to Indian army’s. The initial training was strict exercise and guerrilla tactics. They were given supplemented training by CIA in commando tactics, guerrilla warfare techniques, sabotage and the use of explosives. They became highly proficient in the use of light arms, learned rock climbing, and parachute jumps which qualified them for paratroopers wings. The most important training was going to be the airborne training. As per plan, all members of Establishment 22 were to be qualified paratroopers. If the Tibetans were to operate behind Chinese lines the logical

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10. Quoted from an interview with Uban. Mikel Dunham .*Buddha’s Warriors: The Story of the CIA Backed Tibetan Freedom Fighters, the Chinese Invasion and the Ultimate Fall of Tibet*, Jerem6 P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York, 2004, Chapter 10, ‘Last Stand’, p. 359.

11. John Kenneth Knaus op cit., p. 271.

12. Gyalo Thondup *The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong: The Untold Story of my Struggle for Tibet*, Penguin Random House India, 2016, pp. 223-224.

13. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison op cit, p. 184.

means of infiltrating them to the other side of the Himalayas would be by parachute. They were commanded by Tibetan officers.<sup>14</sup>

According to Thondup, the original agreement called for these men only inside Tibet presumably to organise resistance activities there and not merely to defend India's border or perform other missions for India.

In case of war with China the Indian Government was said to have a secret plan to win Tibet's independence with the S.F.F. in the lead. Mullik, in his memoir *The Chinese Betrayal* wrote that he was convinced that Nehru himself was preparing for the day when it would be possible for India to reestablish Tibet in a semi-independent if not independent status. In case of another war with China, the Tibetans could be used in the front lines of a war waged in their own country.<sup>15</sup> The Indians never said as much to the Tibetan troops but the illusion that they were preparing for their own war kept them going. In practice however, this ultimate goal remained distant and secondary. The force was authorised to act only on the Indian side of the frontier and not to cross into Tibet. The U.S provided light arms and instructions for this. For the Tibetans it was also a kind of repayment for Indian hospitality.

Tibetans were trained by the Indian Central Intelligence Bureau (C.I.B.) and, after training, would either stay with the C.I.B. or go on to a leadership post in a new Tibetan force in the Indian military. The Mustang Tibetans regarded the S.F.F. as the *Chushi Gangdrug* branch in India.

In addition to Establishment 22, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs also set up an Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force (ITBF) under its auspices in October 1962. Both forces were stationed in border areas. As understood by the Tibetans, even though the I.T.B.F. included Tibetans in its ranks, Establishment 22 was specially created "to restore independence to Tibet." Based in Chakarta near Dehra Dun, the S.F.F. was initially trained by both U.S. and Indian officers but was led by four Tibetan commanders—Ratu Ngawang, Gyatso Dhondup, Jampa Kalden, and Jampa Wangdu. Both Ratu and Gyatso were from Lithang, Andrug Gompo Tashi's district; Jampa Kalden was from Chamdo; and Jampa Wangdu was from Lhasa.

Descriptions are given about how that secrecy was maintained and the identity of 12 Tibetans initially selected for the parachute jumping training were carefully concealed. Agra was the only training centre for airborne training facilities. Tibetans were placed in crude barracks far from the training centre and jumps were scheduled around noon when, the sun was in the midsky and not many were around. As an added precaution, cap badges were arranged for them with the number 12 along with crossed *kukri* knife blades of Gurkha Rifles for the duration of their stay in Agra. The number 12 was selected to give an impression that they were Gorkhas. After independence from the British, the Indian army had inherited 7 regiments of Gorkhas recruited from Nepal. Along with four

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14. John Kenneth Knaus, *op cit.*, pp. 272.

15. *Ibid*, p. 272.



more regiments that were transferred to the British army, the last regiment was numbered 11. Hence the selection of 12 for the S.F.F. on the assumption that most lowland Indians would be unable to differentiate between the features of the Gorkhas and the Tibetans.<sup>16</sup>

The United States provided them with arms and instructions. American interests were served by the firsthand intelligence gathered by the force as well as the prospects for the rebirth of the resistance movement. Like the Indians, the Americans however saw the force as potential rather than actual combatants for the long term cause of Tibetan independence. But it was going to be a secret exercise, to be kept secret not only from the Indians but from the bulk of the Indian military as well.

Regular updates were provided to Nehru regarding the regiment and he was even invited to visit the hill camp. Afraid that the Indian P.M. addressing Tibetan combatants on Indian soil would make a diplomatic disaster, he initially refused to give a speech but he became visibly moved after the visit and when they presented him his favourite rose bud he became so emotional that he said that India did back them and 'vowed that they would one day return to an independent country'.<sup>17</sup>

Mullick said that he was convinced that Nehru himself was preparing for the day when it would be possible for India to reestablish Tibet in a semi-independent if not independent status. Furthermore, war with China, previously unthinkable, had become a reality by then. If it broke out again in future, the Tibetans would then be in frontlines of a war waged in their own country. Nehru did not live long after this and this ultimate goal was to remain distant forever, and secondary to the protection of India's border. The frontier force was authorised to act only on the Indian side of the frontier and not to cross into Tibet for the purpose of challenging the Chinese. After the death of Nehru (27 May 1964), the Geo political realities began to change and Indo U.S. relations became strained over the issue of Kashmir. Shastri was the P.M. for a short period (9 June 1964 to 11 January 1966) and was succeeded by Indira Gandhi. She had a meeting with President Johnson, in Washington which turned out to be a success and the Indo US relation got back some of the lustre it lost during the previous year's Kashmir crisis. By this time the American aid to Mustang guerillas had become somewhat irregular. Funds were again provided for both the Mustang guerrillas and the S.F.F. Sensing an opportunity the C.I.A. in April asked the 303 Committee to approve a major \$18 million Tibetan paramilitary package. Part of this was earmarked to maintain the Mustang force for a three year term. The package also included a funding for 5000 man increase in Establishment 22.<sup>18</sup> In order to justify its proposal, C.I.A. even suggested that the force could be utilised in the event of an all out hostility

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16. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, op cit, Chapter13, 'Chakrata' pp. 176-187.

17. Ibid, p. 187.

18. Ibid, p. 219.

between the U.S and China over the war in Vietnam. Rather than justifying the Tibetan operation solely on its own merits, C.I.A. now was trying to loosely fix it to the Indo China policy. But this seemed like a geopolitical fantasy. It was highly unlikely that India would agree to draw the wrath of China by sponsoring a Tibet front if the U.S and China went to war over Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> Funds were still flowing to the guerrillas in Mustang. The money sent through in a clandestine manner was utilised in Pokhara for purchase of foodstuffs and textiles to be shipped to the guerrillas via mule caravans. However following some differences with the Mustang leadership over the plan of action the C.I.A. decided to restrict the supply of funds to them and initiated a process of winding up its programme for Mustang. Relation with the Establishment 22 or S.F.F. continued for a few more years. Most of the actual training however was being imparted by Uban's men. C.I.A basically provided some advice and funds. As a part of that plan a new team of advisors was brought in to boost its level of assistance to Chakrata. Among them was Tucker Gougelman who was brought in as the senior advisor of all paramilitary forces in India in 1966. After serving in intelligence offices in various capacities in different countries, he was finally in Vietnam advising the South Vietnamese special branch of police cum intelligence. In India, in addition to organising the Establishment 22, he was given the charge of managing the mountaineering expeditions aimed at placing a nuclear powered censor atop the Nanda Devi summit.<sup>20</sup>

This time, India was eager to increase the number of Tibetans at Establishment 22 and even decided to recruit Gorkhas into the unit. The S.F.F. by this time had increased to five or six companies with 172 guerrillas in each company grouped into battalions commanded by Tibetan political leaders. The Indians saw this as a means of expanding the mandate and abilities of the force beyond things Tibetan.

The Tibetans were not happy with the prospect of inducting Gorkhas into their force as they represented two distinct cultures and their ethnic characteristics were different. This would lead to an ethnic dilution they feared. To keep peace within the force, a cap was set and no more than 700 Gorkhas would be taken in. Moreover in order to restrict the mixing of the two ethnic groups, the Gorkhas would be segregated into their own group at Chakrata. Though given the same paramilitary training as in the previous S.F.F. cycles, Gorkha group was relegated primarily to base security and administration.<sup>21</sup>

As years passed, the probability of fighting for their own homeland was becoming a distant dream for the Tibetans. Rather they were being utilised for intelligence collection from the high altitudes. They worked for India from bases along the frontier from Kashmir border. Two companies set up a base on the Siachen glacier to the eastern Himalayan peaks that separated Tibet from the

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19. Ibid.

20. Ibid, p. 225.

21. Ibid, pp. 225-26.

Northeast Frontier Agency. From these bases they conducted cross border reconnaissance operations to place sensors for detecting nuclear and missile tests and devices for intercepting Chinese military communications. Several bases were established in Ladakh and N.E.F.A. especially to support their operations.<sup>22</sup>

### The S.F.F. in Action

The S.F.F had carried on some missions outside India also. Back in 1964, the team had staged a brief but deadly foray from Nepal toward Tingri when the force inherited the wiretrap mandate from Joelikote.<sup>23</sup> Nearly all the communications between China and Tibet used overground lines supported by concrete or improvised wooden poles. The C.I.A. had already started a wiretrap programme in southern China using teams from Laos. The S.F.F proved up to the task. In a project code named GEMINI, it began infiltrating from N.E.F.A. with recording gear during 1966 to supply the guerrillas while they filled the tapes. An ARC<sup>24</sup> C46 was dispatched to an airfield near Siliguri in West Bengal. The results were mixed. The S.F.F. did a good job but what they collected was not of much use. The project was finally deserted after a newspaper reported about the mysterious flights over Sikkim.<sup>25</sup>

One of the last C.I.A. supported operations took place in 1969. Four S.F.F. were trained in the use of sophisticated 'impulse probe' wiretraps. Buried underneath a telephone line, the trap transmitted conversions to a solar powered relay station established on a border mountaintop in N.E.F.A. The data was later relayed to a base further south. Although several traps were installed successfully two S.F.F. members disappeared.<sup>26</sup>

The regimental song of the SFF gives some ideas about their activities so far. Their Tibetan identity is also highlighted in the song.

*We are the Vikasi  
The Chinese snatched Tibet from us and kicked us out of our home  
Even then, India kept us like their own  
One day, surely one day we will teach the Chinese a lesson  
Whenever opportunities arise we will play with our lives  
In the Siachen glacier we got our second chance*

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22. Jonn Kenneth Knaus, op cit., p. 273.

23. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, op cit. chapter 15, 'The Joelikote Boys', pp. 196-204, 227.

24. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison op cit. pp190-191 Aviation Research Centre created by the Intelligence Bureau in 1963 as a front to coordinate aviation cooperation with the CIA.

25. Ibid, p. 227.

26. Ibid, p. 242.

*Our young martyrs have no sadness whatsoever  
 Whether it is Kargil or Bangladesh we will not lose our strength  
 Whenever opportunities arise we will play with our lives  
 Where there is our Potala Palace and lovely Norbulingka  
 The throne of the Dalai Lama was dear even then  
 Remember those martyrs of ours who sacrificed with their lives  
 Let's sing together Hail to our Tibet Hail to our Tibet Hail to our Tibet<sup>27</sup>*

History records how the S.F.F. was raised by India with a broader objective of utilising those Tibetans, in case of a confrontation with China, to organise resistance activities there, to restore the independence of Tibet if possible and not merely to defend India's border. But so far that objective has not taken any concrete shape. They have fought and sacrificed their lives but that was certainly not against China for their motherland.

The first major operation in which they took part was the war against Pakistan over the issue of Bangladesh in 1971. India was secretly supporting the resistance fighters from East Pakistan. Major General Uban, now considered one of India's most seasoned experts in nonconventional warfare, was placed in charge of a guerrilla training programme of 10,000 East Pakistani youths in Chakarta.<sup>28</sup> The S.F.F. had by this time grown into 64 Tibetan companies in addition to the support units, C.I.A.'s contact with them had almost come to an end and they had not participated in any serious combat till now. Seven companies were even said to be put in charge of traffic control in Ladakh. Uban lobbied to involve this elite unit in contingencies against East Pakistan. Dharamsala (where the Central Tibetan Administration or the Dalai Lama's Government in Exile is based) had to be consulted before the final decision. It was a hard choice for the Tibetan Government as refusing the permission would appear to being ungrateful to India while they felt they themselves had no quarrel with Pakistan. After considering all the pros and the cons, Dharamsala gave approval.<sup>29</sup>

By late October 3000 Tibetans were brought in to the Indian border adjacent to East Pakistan's Chittagong Hill Tract (C.H.T.). It was decided that S.F.F. would be charged with staging guerrilla raids across the C.H.T. The force began its Operation Eagle in the second week of November. By the time all out war was officially declared in early December, the S.F.F. had already been inside East Pakistan for about 3 weeks. At the time when Pakistan capitulated and Bangladesh emerged as an independent state within two weeks of outbreak of the war S.F.F. were within 40 miles of Chittagong port. Taking leave of their normal practice they paraded through Chittagong. A total of 23 Indian officers and 45

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27. Several versions of the song with video of their training and parachute jumpings is available on the inter net, e.g., [youtube.com/watch?v=kiOgwtkoVpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiOgwtkoVpo). The songs are generally in Hindi.

28. Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, op cit., p. 242.

29. Ibid, p. 243.

Tibetans were awarded for their gallantry, 580 Tibetans received cash bonus. However 49 Tibetans had paid with their lives for the birth of a nation that was not their own.<sup>30</sup>

After the late 1970s some changes were brought in when the S.F.F. was used in the new role of (CT) combating terrorism. In 1977 some 500 commandos from the force were sent to Sarasawa for a possible action against rioters during national elections and the election that passed off peacefully. After this only 60 commandos were retained for CT duties and 500 army troops were sent to Sarasawa for CT training, forming a new elite detachment known as the special group under the command of the S.F.F. IG. By early 1984 the elite Special Group became the primary CT force in India and they participated in the Operatrion Bluestar to flush out terrorists from the Golden Temple in Amritsar between 1st and 10<sup>th</sup> June 1984.<sup>31</sup>

One Battallion of Tibetan S.F.F.s is normally stationed on the Siachen glacier with other Indian army troops. In 1985 they played a pivotal role in Operation Meghdoot to capture Siachen from Pakistan They also had a role in Operation Vijay in Kargil against Pakistan from May to July , 1999 and also for checking of insurgency in Kashmir. All this do find mention in their regimental song but what the song does not mention is the function of intelligence collection from the high altitudes that has become their specialty from the very first days. Nor is it clear whether they were used in Operation All Clear in Bhutan<sup>32</sup> to flush out the United Liberation Force of Assam (U.L.F.A.) insurgents who had taken refuge in Bhutan. According to one report, they were indeed employed there in Bhutan, dressed in the uniform of Royal Bhutan Army. According to one anonymous report, the efficient shelling and destruction of general headquarters of ULFA in Samdrup Jhonkar could not have been done by inexperienced force like Royal Bhutan Army. So far, the Government of India however has not mentioned their role in any such operation.

The S.F.F. continues to be an elite and ultra secret regiment of the Indian armed force Even though it is placed under an army officer of the rank of Major General, it is not directly under the Indian army. Recruited and trained by the R.A.W. (Research and Analytical Wing), it is placed under the Cabinet Secretariat. It has six battalions and the units have their own rank structures. It also has its own insignia which in reference to Tibet is a snow lion. In spite of the fact that there are several websites available with their primary history and achievements, the Government of India continues to maintain silence about their actual role in high altitude intelligence gatherings. Information about the force, along with its

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30. Ibid, pp. 243-245.

31. [bootcampmilitaryfitnessinstitute.com/elite-specialforce/indian-elite-special-forces/indian-special-frontier-force-sff](http://bootcampmilitaryfitnessinstitute.com/elite-specialforce/indian-elite-special-forces/indian-special-frontier-force-sff), accessed on 16.3.23.

32. This was launched on December 15, 2003 in southern districts of Bhutan to flush out two rebel outfits ULFA and NDFB of Assam who had set up camps in Bhutan Intervention of the Indian army was widely suspected by a section of the media. The involvement of the SFF was also speculated without any proof.

composition, functions and operations are kept under total secrecy. Even though the Tibetans themselves are quite familiar with its functioning, the youths who are in service are trained not to discuss their profession with outsiders and even the retired personnel who agree to talk, do so on the condition of anonymity. In fact, even their sacrifice is hardly ever brought into light. It is difficult to get any detailed or authentic information about their operations and engagements from secondary sources. Keeping in mind the special character of the force they are encouraged to develop familiarity with their cultural heritage and the basic issues underlying Tibet China relations. In the southern district of Sikkim, the Tibetan Kunphenling settlement camp in Ravangla is situated adjacent to the army cantonment. It is a centre for the S.F.F regiment and being so, it is common for the Tibetan youths of Ravangla to join the force. There are several recruits from the surrounding Tibetan settlements in Darjeeling district as well. In the cantonment, as the author had the chance to observe once, certain special days from the history of Tibet like the uprising day of 10<sup>th</sup> March was celebrated with hoisting of the Tibetan flag and the (Indian) officer in charge takes the guard of honour. The Tibetan youths were taught the basic facts of Tibetan history and chronology through a small library. Documentation of important events and contemporary developments among the Tibetan community both in and outside their motherland were also maintained along with a collection of paper clippings from newspapers

It is only recently that some information about the force came to the public domain when the role of the S.F.F was openly acknowledged by the army in August 2020 in the operation to occupy previously unoccupied heights in Chusul sector in Eastern Ladakh. The context was the recent Sino Indian confrontation in Ladakh and the specific issue the death of Nyima Tenzin, a S.F.F. cadre near Pangong lake in Ladakh from a landmine dating the 1962 war. Another S.F.F cadre was also injured. The sacrifice attracted media attention. It was discussed in T.V and newspapers and the internet was proliferated with some websites with basic information about the force. The coffin of Nyingma Tenzin, was draped in both Indian and Tibetan flags. Many people, most of them Tibetans from Ladakh, assembled and he was put to rest with chants of *Bhrat mata ki jai* (hail to India), *Jai Tibet* (hail to Tibet) and *Vikas Regiment Zindabad*. Posters were put up with 'He lived for the love of Tibet and died for the love of India'.<sup>33</sup> All this naturally put the spotlight on the role of the Tibetans in Indian army and revived the Tibet issue once again in Indian political discourse. Even members of the C.T.A were allowed to express their observations. BJP's General Secretary Ram Madhab, members of the Exile Tibetan community, the Dalai Lama Himself and some representatives of Indian army were present in the funeral. Ram Madhab initially shared a picture of himself at Tenzin's funeral. The political leadership and the Indian army however refrained from commenting on the S.F.F. Even Ram Madhab

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33. [Economictimes,indiatimes.com/news/defence/sff-tibetan-hero-who-died-while-foiling-china-incursion.....](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sff-tibetan-hero-who-died-while-foiling-china-incursion.....) accessed on 27.1.23.

deleted his photograph later. This was interpreted by some analysts as part of Indian strategy of sending a signal to China, i.e., to put pressure on China by reviving the Tibet issue. In other words, the Tibetans were used to serve the national interest of India. Palden Sonam, a political analyst, believes that death of the soldier highlighted the Tibet issue and renewed solidarity among Indians for Tibetan cause, it is unknown, he pointed out, whether Ram Madhab deleted his photograph because of pressure from New Delhi or Beijing. The Indian Government seemed tactful here. "It lets the media report freely about the SFF and its role, while it remains silent." he commented.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The regiment was and still is regarded as an elite force with particular expertise in collection of intelligence, paratrooping and guerilla warfare in the mountains. Their activities are still kept under a veil of secrecy. They have sacrificed their lives for India - both within and outside the country. Initially it was their patriotism and commitment to free their motherland from Chinese control that inspired the Tibetans to join the guerilla force of *Chusi Gandrug*. There used to be a close relation between the *Chusi Gandrug* and the S.F.F and several from that guerilla outfit shifted to the S.F.F. Some of the S.F.F veterans still remember how in those days some of the first generation soldiers were middle aged and even *lamas* (monks) by profession. They did not have proper uniforms and some were even dressed in monk's robes.<sup>35</sup> But the situation changed over the years and in 2009 the remunerations, emoluments and pensions of the force were revised to give parity with those of the Indian army. Being so, joining the S.F.F has now become just a profession for many Tibetan youths who are physically fit and has an adventurous bent of mind. The fire with which their forefathers had initially joined the force have gradually died down. It was learnt from the veterans that there is a considerable number of vacancies in the force and not all the youths are interested in joining the profession any more. Opting for Indian citizenship and going abroad is regarded as a better career option to them.<sup>36</sup> They are aware that with the Tibetan issue reaching a practical stalemate, fight for Tibet and the possibility of returning to their homeland looks like a distant possibility.

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34. [dw.com/en/india-china-tension-soldiers-death-puts-spotlight-on-tibetans-in-india/a-54913740](http://dw.com/en/india-china-tension-soldiers-death-puts-spotlight-on-tibetans-in-india/a-54913740), accessed on 27.1.23.

35. For life experience of some such guerilla warriors who had taken part in Bangladesh war and are now settled in Arunachal Pradesh see 'They came, they fought, they stayed', the [hindu.com/news/national/other-states/they-came-they-fought-they-stayed/article176443356erc](http://hindu.com/news/national/other-states/they-came-they-fought-they-stayed/article176443356erc), accessed on 27.1.23.

36. Information collected from some veteran SFF personnel in Darjeeling. They agreed to speak on condition of anonymity.

History of the S.F.F. in the Indian armed force reminds one of a particular period of time when Tibet's independence from China still appeared possible. It is about how India's Tibet policy has evolved over the years. Its story is also about how over the years the commitment of the Tibetan youths in the force gradually diverted to safeguarding the security concerns of India that has now become their second home.

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