

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*An Indian Perspective on
the Dalai Lama's Statement
on Reincarnation*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Swati Chawla

13 August 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Swati Chawla, Associate Professor of History and Digital Humanities, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University.

Chair: Dr. Gokul K.S., Assistant Professor, Amity University, Noida.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- Commencing the seminar, the Chair, Dr. Gokul K.S. contextualised the issue of the Dalai Lama's succession within geopolitical and cultural dimensions. He highlighted that this issue is not merely bilateral in nature, but is a complex intersection of religion, politics, and Himalayan community identity. Dr. Gokul noted that global commentary often frames the issue of reincarnation and/or succession as strategic in nature, while overlooking the deeply rooted religious and cultural stakes for the people most affected.
- Dr. Gokul emphasised that the debate must include the aspirations of Himalayan Buddhists and Tibetans in exile, beyond state-level calculations. He highlighted that India's support for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community has been a cornerstone of its moral and cultural diplomacy. This, he argued, makes India a principal stakeholder whose approach could significantly influence regional stability and the preservation of religious freedom.
- Dr. Swati Chawla began by challenging the reduction of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation to a political tactic. She argued that the legitimacy of the succession is faith-based and cannot be dictated or nullified by political decree. The communities involved, particularly in the Himalayan belt, view the Dalai Lama's role as inseparable from their cultural identity, and thus succession is a matter of religious integrity rather than state policy alone.
- Dr. Chawla noted that district councils in Ladakh, Kinnaur, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh have formally resolved to reject any China-appointed Dalai Lama. This reflects an unequivocal rejection of external interference, and a commitment to uphold the Dalai Lama's decision regarding his successor. Such positions also reflect the

local populations' awareness of their cultural continuity, and their dependence on the authenticity of spiritual leadership.

- The speaker stressed that India has not merely been a host but has also benefited from the presence of Tibetans in exile. Their institutions have enriched India's cultural and spiritual landscape, created tourism opportunities, and fostered educational exchanges. This reciprocal relationship has been a hallmark of India's soft power, while also fostering goodwill at the grassroots level in Himalayan regions.
- Dr. Chawla highlighted the transformative role played by the Dalai Lama's support for Tibetan nunneries, which has led to the emergence of women *Geshemas* — holders of the highest academic degree in the Gelug tradition. Many have returned to under-resourced Himalayan nunneries, revitalising them and mentoring younger nuns. This, she observed, represents a full-circle moment in which exile-initiated educational investments are now benefiting Indian Himalayan communities directly.
- Beyond spiritual influence, Tibetan exile institutions have contributed to material well-being through job creation, entrepreneurship support, and local economic stimulation. They also played a significant role in India's COVID-19 relief efforts by mobilising trained Tibetan healthcare professionals, and in national security through Tibetan soldiers serving in the Special Frontier Force of the Indian Army. Such contributions underline the tangible value of the Tibetan presence in India.
- Dr. Chawla observed that the central institutions responsible for managing the succession process are based in India, notably the Gaden Phodrang Trust registered in Dharamshala in 2011. The Trust's leadership, including the second senior-most figure after the Dalai Lama, is also India-based, making the country indispensable to the process. This fact strengthens the case for India to articulate a clear position aligned with both national interest and moral responsibility.
- The speaker stressed that the Indian government has consistently upheld freedom of religion for all, including Tibetans in exile. This principle, she argued, should continue to guide India's policy not only during the Dalai Lama's lifetime but also afterwards, ensuring ongoing administrative and material support for Tibetan settlements for as long as necessary.

- The speaker concluded with a proposal, to confer the Bharat Ratna upon the Dalai Lama. She framed this not as a political gesture, nor solely for the Tibetan cause, but as an affirmation of India's values, its tradition of offering sanctuary, and the historic bond it shares with the Tibetan people. Such recognition, she argued, would be both a tribute to the Dalai Lama's contributions and a reinforcement of India's moral leadership.

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