

**ESSENCE OF REFUGEE'S IDENTITY WITH PARTICULAR
REFERENCE TO TIBETAN REFUGEES IN THE INDIAN HIMALAYAS.**

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ABSTRACT

What do we mean by identity? Everyone has a different identity based on multiple aspects. This paper is a study on Tibetan refugees in the Indian Himalayas and what identity means to them. What is the essence of Tibetan identity? Being a Tibetan does not necessarily mean speaking their language, following a specific religion, or belonging to a specific place. What binds them to the Tibetan identity even after being in a foreign land? To find the answers, the open-ended interview schedule was used with some in-depth case studies. Respondents were chosen from Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and West Bengal. The case studies analyze the shared experience of the refugees who made their escape from Tibet. Keeping intact the Tibetan identity is the key to the survival and unity of the refugee population which is scattered all over the world.

Keywords: Identity, Refugee, Tibetan, Diaspora.

1: Identity

The paper studies identity from the viewpoint of Tibetan refugees settled in the Indian Himalayas. Central to this analysis is the challenges faced by the Tibetan refugee community in Indian Himalayas during their journey to India. Today, identity constitutes one of the main foci in socio-political and historical research. According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, the phrase identity politics has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. (Heyes 2002)The most important and revolutionary element of identity politics is the demand that oppressed groups be recognized not despite

their differences but specifically because of their differences. Identity politics is an important, and perhaps necessary, a precursor to the current emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in national and international politics. Proponents of identity politics argue that those who do not share the identity and the life experiences that it brings to members of an oppressed group cannot understand what it means to live life as a person with that identity. That is, people who do not share a particular group identity cannot understand the specific terms of oppression and thus cannot find adequate solutions to the problems those members of the group face.

(Burke 2006) the paper talks about identity and how it changes over time. The paper takes into account ICT identity control theory and explains how the hierarchy in identity leads to changes. Second, he talks about the multiple identities with shared meaning, and for that, he has studied the newly married couple for a year and the changes they undergo in terms of identity. His hypotheses about change in identities are supported and further implications for extending identity control theory are discussed. (Martin 1988) argues that over the last two decades something new has happened in the field of identity, he believes that there have been debates over personal identity but rather a new issue regarding identity crisis has emerged where no one seems to have noticed.

Identity politics assumes that the shared identity and experiences of the people are a rational basis for political action, notwithstanding the different and sometimes competing interests of individual members of the communities. Basic to this assumption is the idea that the people constitute a legitimate political constituency deserving of equal rights and representation. Identity politics has been important in the development of inclusive identity-based socio-political movements since it insists on the necessity of incorporating the perspectives of the diverse constituencies to serve the varied needs of a notably fragmented community. Identity politics has sometimes been criticized as naïve, fragmenting, essentialist, and reductionist. Bell Hooks, for instance, argues that identity is too narrow a basis for politics. The continuing intellectual crisis surrounding the history of identity politics paradoxically marks its importance to contemporary history and practice.

On a theoretical plane, the question of identity takes us to the core of the liberal communitarian debate. Liberalism as a version of the product of modernity distinguishes between the individual identity that is tradition-bound and community-specific on the one hand and the identity as self-development/self-awareness, which is individual and self-centered on the other. While the pre-liberal era during which the social philosophy was premised on teleology ('duty' rather than on right) rather than on ontology, upheld the first idea. The liberal era which began in the seventeenth century (Gray: 1998, p. 9) exposing the modern individualistic outlook and produced a social philosophy premised on natural rights (as in Hobbes) and subsequently on social rights (as in Green). For a long-time, the liberal approach to identity considered the transition from community to individualist identity as both natural and desirable. But in recent years, communitarian theorists such as Taylor (Frieden 1989, p. 75) have criticized the liberal concept of the self as rootless or unencumbered and have considered community as the source of an individual's identity. This points to the fact that about the question of identity, individual and community are mutually hostile, hence an undercurrent of tension runs within the concept of identity. It also implies that if we consider the interdependence of individual and community, it pertains to taking into cognizance the identity of the communities and individuals simultaneously. However, in the triadic framework as developed by Dipankar Gupta (1997) one significant aspect that seems promising as a theoretical tool in the analysis of the identity question as in the present context is that, if the identities are malleable and susceptible to the political contexts, identities must therefore be seen in terms of their transitivity rather than fixity. This implies that the identities are dynamic and transforming in nature and are not static and hence do not remain the same. This makes sense in case of the changing nature of the community identities in case of the Tibetan Diaspora, where the Pan-Tibetan identity itself has developed with contextual changes over time and space, negating the erstwhile regional and sectarian identities that existed before the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

2: Tibetan Identity Before Chinese Invasion

Tibetans, before the Chinese invasion, did not represent a pan- Tibetan identity. The traditional Tibetan identity was rooted in religion and sect. The

period before 1950 represents a period of overlapping sectarian and religious identity. Hence, before the Chinese control of Tibet, Tibet was characterized by the existence of internal feuds, tensions, and divisions based on this regional and sectarian identity, quite often overlapping, and the consequent struggle for asserting the superiority of one identity over the other. The bases of the non-homogeneous, plural character of Tibetan identity before 1950 are Region-Based Identity, Religious Sectarian Identity, and Sub-Ethnic Identity. Tibetan society was characterized by the presence of conflicts between the martial Khampas and the land-owning elites. The new self-awareness and the feeling of the necessity to create a new identity opposing the Chinese atrocities in Kham and Amdo began with the Chinese invasion and it became more boldly manifest with the exodus of the Tibetans out of Tibet. The rapid dispersion of the Tibetan ethnic groups in exile led the politicians to weave, maintain and project a self-perceived homogeneous cultural identity. However, the sociological studies (Brauen and Kantowsky 1987; DeVoe 1981; Goldstein 1975; Marazzi 1975; Messerschmidt 1976; Michael 1985; Nowak 1984; Ott-Marti 1976; Saklani 1978 and Sander 1984) of Tibetans living abroad suggest that the refugees are having difficulties negotiating their multiple identities. In this context, we shall now explore the shaping of a new Identity by the Tibetan Diaspora in Indian Himalayas.

3: Questions on Tibetan Identity

To understand the perspective of identity from Tibetan refugees in the Indian Himalayas, five Tibetan refugee settlements; Dalhousie and Dharamshala from Himachal Pradesh, Ravangla from Sikkim, Darjeeling and Sonada from West Bengal have been chosen. Sixty respondents from each settlement have been taken for study and among them, sixty-six respondents have been born in Tibet and are now living in India. Some in-depth studies will help give a detailed insight and perspective on the notion of identity from their perspective. The case study taken here is from the ones who shared the same experiences while fleeing Tibet.

Following are some in-depth studies that help us understand the perspective of identity from the viewpoint of Tibetan refugees in the Indian Himalayas. To do so, questions were asked focusing on the concept of identity, and later few case studies are taken to know the concept of shared experience.

- **Dr. Kunchok Tsundue** a respondent from Darjeeling When asked, it has been around 50 years that you have been living in exile. New generation Tibetan youths are born and brought up in a new socio-cultural climate. Moreover, with the onslaught of globalization, value systems have changed drastically. In the light of these developments have you been successful in preserving your linguistic, cultural, and religious identity?

On the above question, the respondent responded that it was not possible to keep one's linguistic or cultural identity free from influences. It is not possible to go for an isolated identity. However, they have been able to preserve their religious, cultural, and linguistic identity as Tibetan through programs in schools and through other programs and activities they conduct.

In 1959 with the Chinese invasion and consequently the flight of the Tibetans, there was a new identity developing in Tibet. It was a pan-Tibetan identity: everyone saw himself/herself as a Tibetan irrespective of their sectarian or regional leanings. Today, this identity of being a 'Tibetan' has remained central to the understanding of Identity. Regional boundaries (being one from Amdo, Kham, or U-Tsang) have melted down in exile in terms of linguistic identity. A new language has developed a refined language that differs from any regional language that was spoken in Tibet. However, this new language which has been developed is simple and everyone understands it, and is easy to communicate. This linguistic unity has helped in the process of nation-building and endeavors to make one Tibet. The necessity of keeping the various dialects is not important but some leaders or people belonging to a particular region have asserted the necessity to use a particular dialect.

In the case of religion, His Holiness Dalai Lama is revered and respected by all sects. He has been able to strike a balance between all sects of religion, that is, four sects of Buddhism and Bon. All 5 schools of Tibetan religion flourish in exile. Seats are reserved in Parliament for all the sects.

- **Mr. Tenzin Tsundue** another respondent was asked, How do you understand the notion of 'being a Tibetan'; what is your understanding of the concept of Tibetan National identity?

He responded When talking about 'being a Tibetan' and the 'Tibetan

National Identity' they are two different things. When one says 'Tibetan' there is a huge area, all over the Himalayas. Whatever the national identities that they have acquired in the past 50 years, 100 years from Ladakh, Lahore city, Garhwal, Nepal, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Gangtok, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and all over Tibet there is a pan-Tibetan identity and are bound together by cultural affinity. And for him, he believes that Tibetan-ness comes out of peoples' attitude towards nature and, that therefore creates a unique social structure. Tibetan-ness does not mean Buddhism. There are Christian Tibetans, there are Muslim Tibetans.

- **Ms. Doma Gyari Drawu** was asked about the notion of Tibetan Muslims in Exile and the absence of the reservation of seats in the Parliament in Exile for the Tibetan Muslims.

Ms. Doma Gyari Drawu responded that In the Jammu and Kashmir State there is a Tibetan Refugee Settlement. There are Tibetan Muslims in that settlement. All these and many other Tibetan Muslims in other parts of India possess the Green Book. They pay tax to the Government in exile and they are eligible voters. Tibetan Muslim youths are actively working with the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC). Tibetan Muslims were holding high posts in the Government in exile who have retired now. As of now, Mr. Mahmud is working as a Protocol Officer with the Department of Information and International Relations (DIIR). But yes, the government in exile has not reserved any seat for them in the Assembly. She feels that they constitute an equally important religious group of the Tibetan people and that there should have been seats reserved for them too.

When further asked about her struggle that is aimed primarily at the preservation of the Tibetan identity against the Chinese cultural genocide. She responded by saying that when you talk about the Tibetan Identity, you talk basically in terms of an identity being shaped and molded by the teachings of Buddhism, and that, recognizing the presence of a Religion outside the Buddhist fold would create confusion about your identity itself.

Then further questioning is this factor that has led to the present situation of not having a formal recognition of the Muslims through reservations in the Parliament?

She responded by saying that, Yes apparently it appears so. It is probable, but can't say exactly.

- **Mr. Thubten Samphel** in this connection, when asked, it is very striking to note that when you are talking about the Tibetan identity, you are talking about that identity that is built on the teachings of Buddhism. You are taking only in terms of Buddhism, Buddhist culture, and Tibetan Buddhist identity. Conforming to this idea, you have made reservations for 4 sects of Buddhism and Bon. You are not at all talking about the Tibetan Muslim community; you have not provided for any reservation for the Tibetan Muslims in your Parliament. If you are fighting against the religious-cultural genocide in Tibet, are you also not in some way practicing some form of religious-cultural genocide?

Mr. Thubten Samphel responded, No. But the Tibetan Muslims claim that they are Indians.

Further, when asked, how do you safeguard the identity and interest of the smaller groups of Tibetans like the Tibetan Muslims, the Amdocs, and the Khams, etc under the assimilationist threat from a pan-Tibetan identity?

Mr. Thubten Samphel replied, in the case of small ethnic and linguistic groups like the Khams, Amdocs, etc., not thought of anything as such to date. But, looking at the religious groups, the vision held by His Holiness the Dalai Lama is secular and democratic. So, all the religious groups revere and respect him. He has been able to provide a unifying leadership and we do not have any problems. But we exactly don't know what would happen after him.

4: narratives on their journey to India

- **Lopsang** from Dalhousie says he was 15 years boy when he entered India; he recollects his past and tells how his journey has been. He narrates his story from the time he was 6 years when he used to live in Kham until an earthquake which led them to move out of Kham along with his parents to Lasha, the capital of Tibet. He stayed at Lasha till the age of 15 after which he moved out with other five people toward India as the situation there was deteriorating. His journey has been an interesting one as he recollects the struggles he and his friends faced while he was making his great escape from Tibet by then was already under the Chinese.

Lopsang left his parents behind and moved ahead with his friends, the only goal he says then was to meet His Holiness Dalai Lama and ask for his blessings. Keeping the only goal in mind he and his friends left Tibet and moved towards the Nepal border as it was more easily accessible. Going by foot was posing a problem as the Chinese by then had become alert and were keeping a check on the Tibetan population that was escaping. Getting caught by the Chinese government meant severe punishment. To escape that Lopsang and his friends decided to take help from a friend who used to drive a taxi that would ferry goods across the border. He recollects that it took one day to reach the Nepal border from Lasha, they hid amongst the goods and he mentioned that due to the heavy load they nearly got crushed, one of his friends fainted, but luckily they managed to cross the security check.

They entered Nepal but the trouble did not end there. They managed to escape from the Chinese govt but on the way, they were encountered by dacoits and were on a verge of being robbed. They were caught by Nepal police and were detained and questioned. Having failed to justify Nepal police they were handed back to the Chinese government. The Chinese government gave them a choice to return but they insisted on going to India and finally they were allowed.

Lopsang said their goal to meet His Holiness kept them going even if it meant sacrificing their lives. After reaching Nepal, along with his friends started their journey towards India. Their mode of transportation would mostly be walking, during one such occasion, they got lost in the forest of Nepal. He recalls when they nearly drowned in a river and had to survive a night clinging to rock from where they were rescued by the local people. Those people were there to help them, they were provided with food and accommodation but he says due to trauma they hardly ate. The locals tried their best to make them comfortable and to assure them that they are in safe hands. He recollects, the host even made noodles with chicken, and how it was the first time he had chicken as they do not have chicken or egg in Tibet as yak meat is preferred. He says after the meal the host took them upstairs, it was a prayer room where there was a portrait of His Holiness and other Tibetan gods and that was enough to assure them they are in good hands. Lopsang and his friends were monks; they performed some religious rites and prayed. After

the fifth day, one of the men who had rescued them came with a taxi, other people were already present inside the taxi. He says when he reached Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal around 700 Tibetan refugees were waiting to be taken to India, particularly to Dharamshala to meet His Holiness. Eventually, he was taken to Dharamshala where His Holiness resides, and was blessed by him. Now Lopsang is a teacher at Dalhousie refugee camp, he completed his bachelor's degree from India. He left his family back home with a desire to meet His Holiness and when asked does he miss his family he says he is blessed and happy to be so close to his leader.

- **Sonam** respondent from Dharamshala, in the year 1981 Sonam who was already 40 years entered India. He recollects his life in Tibet before he came to India, he says he was a farmer before the invasion of the Chinese and later he used to work for the Chinese as a laborer but as he started to age he decided to meet his spiritual leader His Holiness, Dalai Lama. His journey begins from Tibet that was under Chinese rule to India via Nepal. He starts narrating his struggle, he says after reaching India he went to Dharamshala to meet His Holiness from there he was sent to a refugee camp located at Shimla where he learned the art of carpet weaving and stayed there for another 27 years mastering the art. Now he has been shifted to the old age home at Dharmshala close to his spiritual leader. The thing that satisfies him is the fact he is close to His Holiness, he doesn't fear dying he is waiting calmly to die. When asked why he did not marry he said he did not find anyone who he would love and according to him when love comes the age factor is very important he did not find anyone same as his age, and he said he did not have a home to settle as he has been wandering a lot moving to different places. He said he has been to the Southern part of India, Kolkata, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat where he worked in different fields. He said has seen many Tibetan people going to the united states but he does not have a desire to do so he wants to stay in India and breathe his last

- **Jampa** Tensing respondent from Darjeeling who is in his 70's shares his escape story from Tibet. He says in Tibetan history, Tibet is protected by the mountain, the Himalayas. When the British ruled India, it was difficult for them to get into Tibet because of the Himalayas; he said he never thought that he

would be in exile in India. He said he crossed the border in 1959 with His Holiness Dalai Lama, they said they came at the same time he came with his mother when he was 8 years old. He along with his parents came through the Himalayas, it was a dangerous route, and had to travel with the concept of doing or die. If they were to be in Tibet they would be in the same situation of life or death therefore they chose to come to India even if it was risky.

As he recollected the hardships they faced while crossing the Himalayas he said they chose the lowest range of the Himalayas, now he says it must have been the nature pass. Crossing nature during June or July is not possible so accordingly, it must have been during September, October, or November he cannot say clearly as to which specific month it was. During their journey and while crossing the range they had to be prepared for the consequences and harsh weather. There were no glasses to protect their eyes and no such clothes and technologies to guide and protect them but still, they crossed with homemade remedies that were necessary for protection. They used residue of smoke that is left on the utensils to apply on the face along with butter to protect the skin from snow and for the eyes, they made yak wool fringe and yak woolen clothes to cover hands and feet from the snow.

He talks about different refugee problems around the world but he says when they crossed they knew nothing about the world he only knew land and sky and their will to survive and follow His Holiness. He says there was difficult in assimilating with the locals at first as they were new to the land with their own culture and language. He says if it was not for His Holiness they would still be in Tibet and would be suffering. He says before Dalai Lama came to India and after Tibet was capture by the Chinese, the Tibetan people living in the border areas were not allowed to cross the border and if they were found doing so the people were given to the Chinese government and their consequences would be worse.

From the above studies, we can come to an understanding of the concept of identity among the Tibetan refugees settled in the Indian Himalayas. They have a pan Tibetan identity now and being a Tibetan is not restricted to a region, religion, or language it is 'we feeling' that they feel. The most essential part of being a Tibetan is being able to follow their religious leader His Holiness, Dalai Lama.

Preservation of language and culture is for the unity and smooth flow of teaching from his holiness. Pan identity is helping in building unity for their motivation to return to their land united. From the analysis of the shared experience are from in-depth case studies, one thing was common among them it was the desire to follow the values taught to them by their leader. The values and beliefs are the most important aspect of being a Tibetan as it binds the Tibetan community scattered throughout the world, it helps in keeping them united and further helping them fight for the cause of free Tibet and getting their land back. With the concept of pan identity and the Tibetans using one universal Tibetan language spoken by all, so that the differentiation cannot be made as it was before based on region, different language brings diversification but one language bridges the gap and brings in unification. In terms of religion, a Tibetan can follow any religion but the values and teachings of His Holiness should be respected and accepted by all and this helps them become unified. His Holiness Dalai Lama was the political and spiritual leader of Tibet before the Chinese invasion. As of now, he is a retired political leader but still a spiritual leader. Tibet was a peace-loving country and the people follow the values and teaching of His Holiness to date. His Holiness guidance and leadership are helping them settle down in exile and fighting their fight peacefully.

Conclusion

Identity is a tricky question, we have seen multiple identities of a person but what eventually matters is which identity matters the most. Identity politics is always there, using identity to one's benefit. In this study, we tried to find how a Tibetan refugee in the Indian Himalayas sees himself or herself. For them their identity is not tied to many things, keeping their goals and loyalty the main priority their identity is based on the values and teachings of His Holiness. Many refugees risked their lives and came to India just to be close to their leader. Tibet before had different dialects from different regions but now they have made a simple language, that all the Tibetans can understand. This makes the transmission of values and teachings accessible to all and its help unite all of the Tibetans together despite the regional differences. They are now in India as some of the respondents feared the death and brutality of the Chinese and wanted better lives. Tibetans

believe they are Tibetan at heart and that is their identity but they are thankfully being in India, as one of the respondents said he wants to die in India and does not want to go anywhere else given a choice. The struggles they faced together have contributed to bringing them together. The shared experience helped them to unite in a foreign land and create an identity.

Likewise, other refugees have taken refuge in India, about legal status concerning refugees, there is a lack of specific refugee legislation which led to the adoption of an ad-hoc approach to different refugee influxes by the government since India is neither party to the 1951 Convention on Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol. The differential treatment of the refugees in India is also partly because of the adoption of the Foreigners Act 1946 and the Citizenship Act 1955 which governs the legal status of refugees in India. Since these Acts do not differentiate between individuals of foreign origin who fled their country from persecution with those who are visiting for any purpose. So, in the absence of valid documents, the refugees are liable to 'deportation and detention'. Nonetheless, Tibetans who arrived in India in the late 1950s and early 1960s were accorded refugee status by the Indian government.

A similar situation of refugee emergency was also felt during the Bangladesh Liberation War, where many Bangladeshi refugees were allowed to settle in various parts of Bengal, Bihar, and in the North-Eastern States of India, some of whom were entered illegally into the country and were termed as infiltrators or illegal migrants (Banjan 2009; Sarkar 2010). Further, Bose's (2004) study shows that there are about 10,000 Afghan refugees in India mostly Sikhs and Hindus. The Tamil refugees arrived in various phases, "during the first phase (1983-89), 1,34,053 persons arrived from Sri Lanka. The second phase (1989-91) led to the influx of 1,22,078 persons. The number of refugees dropped significantly during the third phase (1996-2001) when 21,940 refugees arrived" (Dasgupta 2003: 2365).

Likewise, since the beginning of the Tibetan crisis and the subsequent flight of the 14th Dalai Lama to India in 1959, India has been sheltering the Tibetan refugees since then and unlike other refugees who has taken shelter in India, and settled and naturalized as Indian citizens, Tibetan refugees, on the other hand, has

their government-in-exile with the hope of returning to their homeland one day and reinstitute the government. The Government of India also 'granted special status to them and they are allowed to stay in India as long as they wish to or till they have the amicable settlement with the Chinese Government' (Subba 1990).

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