

## **MIGRATED TIBETANS AND THE TIBETAN CAUSE: CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS**

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### **I. The Opening Words**

After a failed uprising against the People's Liberation Army in 1959, the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans fled to India and established a Tibetan Government in exile, now known as the Central Tibetan Administration. It is structured with formal government-like institutions. Over the years there has been a shift in policy from seeking to restore complete independence in Tibet to that of seeking genuine autonomy within the People's Republic of China's framework through non-violent means with an emphasis on dialogue. This switch to a pursuit of autonomy rather than independence serves as a dividing line within the wider Tibetan Diaspora and especially among the educated young adults who are mobilising and holding on to their Tibetan identity.

To be a Tibetan is to be a part of a community of sentiments in which the experience of exodus, exile, refugee status and migration [legal and illegal] is geared towards recovery of homeland. The Tibetan Diaspora across the world and specially India, cling to the dream of "returning" to their home land and the struggle is for the establishment of independent Tibet. This is the uniting force of the diaspora and the basis of Tibetan identity.

Despite this the CTA has shifted its policy towards the "Middle Path Approach". This approach is heavily pushed forth by the exile leadership seeking genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of People's Republic of China. On the other hand the activists and political groups with networks throughout the Diaspora and the underground activist communities in occupied Tibet fiercely resent the Chinese occupation and organise themselves for securing independence. As a result there is a certain degree of confusion on both sides. They are unable to decide, or even understand what is the best solution, policy or goal that the exiled community needs to adopt. This is both a challenge and a dilemma.

If one keeps track of the Tibetan political discussion on the social media, the concern and the importance of understanding for the

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understanding Of this issue of the Middle Path Approach and versus the demand for independence is a major topic being addressed both at the individual and the organisational level. The answer to this question will determine the future of the Tibetans in exile, and the Tibetans in the Diaspora. The post 1979 shift from demand of independence to the Middle Path Approach has complicated the cause rather than bringing clarity into it<sup>2</sup>.

## **II. Migrated Tibetan: The Diaspora**

The Greek meaning of Diaspora is “scattering of seeds” and connotes displacement from one’s origins or place of birth. Diasporas are traditionally understood as ethnic communities that were dispersed beyond the borders of the geopolitically perceived “homeland” through voluntary or forced migration<sup>3</sup>. Though often assimilated after a couple of generations Diasporas live long as the descendants of the original migrants retain a perceived connection with their original “homeland”. Most members of the community do not ever meet and yet they feel a bond with one another. A diaspora may hold multiple identities in common, but these identity issues may shift in priority with the prioritisation made by different political regimes. Identity preservation, among other factors, may be a reason that motivates the Diaspora to mobilise on behalf of the homeland. It also helps the members of the Diaspora to maintain their distinctiveness despite assimilation into their respective countries of settlement<sup>4</sup>.

Diasporas mostly have a radicalising effect on their ethnic kin. Though the Jewish, Armenian, and Cuban Diaspora in the US have show that even when the ethnic kin within the homeland were willing to negotiate for concessions, the Diaspora was not willing to do so and remained radical in their demand; the response of the Tibetan Diaspora remains unique. The Tibetan Diaspora has a moderating impact upon its ethnic kin and is open for significant concessions as against their earlier pre 1979 demands. The theory of ethnic bargaining as formulated by Professor Jenne demonstrates that not much is talked about the mechanism adopted by the Diaspora to intervene to radicalise or moderate the minority in the host country. However the minority demands function as bargaining leverage against the centre. Professor Jenne’s model holds that group radicalisation is driven by (1) perception of shifting power centres and the opportunities that are attached by those power centres and (2) by the influence of an external

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<sup>2</sup> Tenzin Tashi Tseten, Negotiations in the Diaspora, Theses submitted in Central European University, [2015], under the supervision of Professor Erin Jenne

<sup>3</sup> Most commonly cited Diaspora are the Jews, Cubans, Armenians and the Greeks

<sup>4</sup> Yossi Shane, Kinship and Diaspora in International Affairs, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, [2007]; Dagmer Bernstorhoff & Hubertus von Welc, Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora, Orient Longman, [2003]

leader, if any. The minority representatives calibrate their demands according to the shift in the leverage<sup>5</sup>.

This model, strictly, does not apply to the Tibetan Diaspora. Jenne suggests that a national minority, the State majority, and an external lobby co-exists in a traditional political space. In case of Tibet, the host State is China, the outside lobby factor is the Diaspora consisting of the activist groups, youth groups, youth groups, and the youth group around the world and the CTA would be treated as minority that is bargaining with the host country even though it is not a minority in the usual sense of the term. The CTA is in exile and does not function under the host country directly and yet it is the recognised representative of the Tibetans capable of effective negotiations with the host country. This theory is applied to the actors in the Diaspora because the Tibetans that are inside Tibet do not have the agency for effective articulation of demands due to the lack of leadership within Tibet and the Chinese repression<sup>6</sup>.

In view of the above the leadership at Dharamshala emerge as the effective minority leadership for bargaining with China. With this are the external lobbies or leadership within the Tibetan Diaspora which have a strong voice but do not negotiate with China but try to influence the CTA. And Tibet and its Diaspora stands apart from the Jewish, Cuban or the Armenian Diaspora.

A parallel may also be drawn in the religionisation of two Diasporas communities-the Tibetan and the Jewish Diaspora in the twentieth century. There is a similarity despite diversity of these two Diasporas in mobilisation of the Diasporic members. Both have strong religious identity and faced severe political and existential challenges. Nationalist leaders in both cases have tried to strike a balance between secular and religious issues even while using their religious and ethnic identities to attract powerful allies. Leaders in both cases have shifted stand from a staunch to middle path approach.

It is important to note that migration or residence outside the putative homeland does not by itself create a self-conscious Diaspora. There must be an active and concerted effort by the Diasporic and homeland leaders to construct a strong sense of community in exile that is oriented towards the homeland. This political orientation towards the homeland makes a Diaspora a Diaspora. According to Anderson<sup>7</sup> this creation is usually maintained by ritualistic retelling and remembering the story of

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<sup>5</sup> Erin Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Vol. I, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, Pages 11, 13, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, [1991], London, New York: Verso

exile. This is easy in the digitised global era. Zlatko Skrbis<sup>8</sup> this is long distance nationalism. The diaspora tends to nurture a stronger degree of nationalist sentiments than their homeland counterpart

### III. The Tibetan Cause

The Tibetan cause has certain controversies built into it and so it takes form of a standalone problem. China feels the need to defend their stand on Tibet and the Tibetans assert their sovereignty. The fundamental question of inquiry, therefore, is whether Tibet as defined previously was an independent geopolitical territory or was it subordinate to China even prior to being taken over by the People's Republic of China in the 1950s.

Tibet was founded by Emperor Songstan Gampo in 618 century and was a strong empire till the 840s. The major claim put forward by the People's Republic of China is that Tibet has been a part of China since the Yuan Dynasty [1271-1368]<sup>9</sup>. The Central Tibetan Administration claims that Tibet was an independent sovereign state until the PRC<sup>10</sup> invasion in 1949. History is witness to the fact that Tibet and China being in close proximity have shared intimate trade relationships in many different ways. There were even marriage ties between princess Wiencheng and Emperor Songstan Gampo's son in 640 century and Trisong Detsan grandson of Emperor Songstan Gampo attacked china 804 century and eventually married a Chinese princess<sup>11</sup>. During the Song Dynasty [960-1279] and until Yuan Dynasty, China and Tibet operated independently. During the Yuan dynasty both China and Tibet were ruled by the Mongols. During the Ming Dynasty [1368-1644] Tibet operated as an independent geopolitical entity. During the Quing dynasty [1644-1912]<sup>12</sup> Tibet fell to the Quing empire. After the Quing dynasty fell Tibet ruled itself without Chinese influence till PRC took over in the 1950s<sup>13</sup>. As the Communists consolidated control over china, and the Korean war was approaching a stalemate, the American government began to view Tibet as an useful tool for destabilising the Chinese communist government. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson instructed the US

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<sup>8</sup> Zlatko Skrbis, *Long Distance Nationalism: Diaspora, Homeland and Identities*, [1999], Aldershot: Ashgate

<sup>9</sup> Ruled by the Mongol leader Kublai Khan

<sup>10</sup> People's Republic of China & CTA is abbreviation for Central Tibetan Administration.

<sup>11</sup> Samten G. Karmey, "A general Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon", *Memoirs of Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, No. 33, Tokyo, (1975) page 180

<sup>12</sup> Ruled by Manchus of Manchuria

<sup>13</sup> Tenzin Tashi Tseten, *Negotiations in the Diaspora*, Theses submitted in Central European University, [2015], under the supervision of Professor Erin Jenne

ambassador in New Delhi that US would like the Tibetan military's capacity to resist quietly strengthened<sup>14</sup>.

The trigger for violent conflict was a dispute over succession of the Panchen Lama, the second highest Lama after HH Dalai Lama. This led to a Chinese invasion to put down a growing resistance movement. In 1951 Tibet was incorporated into PRC as the Tibetan Autonomous Region [TAR] under rule of 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso but the province was actually subordinated to Chinese Communist Commission's administration. During the following decade China began to take over land that belonged to the monasteries on one hand and on the other hand the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] of America began training rebel units covertly to fight an insurgency war against China<sup>15</sup>.

On March 10, 1959, rumors spread that the Chinese were planning to remove HH Dalai Lama. Thousands of Tibetans surrounded the summer residence of HH Dalai Lama to protect him from harm. The following day the ad hoc People's Assembly declared independence of Tibet which was ratified by three important monasteries of Lhasa endorsed the same. As the resistance intensified Chinese military force attacked HH Dalai Lama's residence with mortar. It was then that HH Dalai Lama made a decision to escape.

However Tibet till date stands apart due to its religious beliefs and ethnic culture.

The 1959 is a watershed year in the Tibetan history. There was an exodus from Tibet to India. India under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru not only granted asylum to HH Dalai Lama but also allowed the setting up of Tibetan government in exile in 1960, now the CTA. Land was allowed for setting up of refugee camps and children's villages etc. However the status of the Tibetans in India remained that of the refugee. The refugee status has, among many other issues has triggered off an identity crisis for the Tibetans. A crisis which has caused many Tibetans to migrate legally or illegally in search of an identity.

Nixon Administration, in 1970s opened up to China. Other powerful nations desiring a good relationship with China refused to hear the Tibetan plea for help<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Foreign Relations of United States, 1950, Vol.VI, East Asia and the Pacific (Washington D C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1976), pages 330-331

<sup>15</sup> Tom A. Grundfeld, The making of Modern Tibet, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996

<sup>16</sup> Yossi Shane, "Ethnic Diaspora and US Foreign Policy, Political Science Quaterly, 109, No, 5 (1994) 811-841; Yossi Shane, Marketing the American Creed Abroad; Diaspora in the US and their Homeland, New York, Cambridge

The idea of Middle Path Approach came to light in the late 1970s. Radical groups emerged to challenge this position. Tibetan Youth Congress emerged as an alternative voice asserting the de facto and de jure independence of Tibet. They attracted the radicals who felt that the CTA is too cautious and the movement had to be more confrontational so that international pressure on the Chinese government can be successfully created. Tibetan People's Freedom Movement was created in New Delhi. But HH Dalai Lama continues to advocate the MPA. Negotiations with the Chinese continued till the mid 80s. Negotiations failed in face of the rigid stand taken by the hard liners.

The process of religionisation and sanctification of Tibetan homeland began in 1913 when the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama issued declaration of independence from China and established his connection to Avlokiteswara – Tibet's most important deity and described his vision of a Buddhist State<sup>17</sup>. Flags, postal stamps etc. were designed and the XIII Dalai Lama began to foreign independent relationship with the foreign powers. In 1954, after incorporation of Tibet with China, locally a People's Committee was created that combined traditional worship of local deities, anti Chinese protests and development of institutions such as the military and the mint<sup>18</sup>. The next significant step in the process occurred in 1957 when rebel leaders from Kham established a resistance movement against the Chinese and called it "Four Rivers, Six Ranges" and offered the XIV Dalai Lama a golden throne in an elaborate ceremony<sup>19</sup>. This forged a connection between the geopolitical State of Tibet, the people of Tibet, and their religious and political leader, the Dalai Lama. In the 1959 exodus in the wake of the Dalai Lama fleeing Tibet, the Tibetan Diaspora began taking shape. After obtaining asylum in India the HH Dalai Lama penned "the prayer of the truthful words"<sup>20</sup> which was recited by observant Tibetan Buddhists each day with their daily prayers creating a blend of religion with nationalism. Through daily recitation the exiled Tibetans bound themselves spiritually with the homeland. The next step in religionisation was recitation of "the prayer of the truthful words" and the Tibetan National Anthem in front of

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University Press, 1999; Yossi Shane, "multicultural Foreign Policy, Foreign Policy, (1995): 69-87

<sup>17</sup> George Dreyfus, "tibetan Religious Nationalism" In *Tibet, Self and Tibetan Diaspora*, cited by Christian Kleigar page 37-57, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2008

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> "May this heartfelt wish of total freedom for Tibet, Which has been awaited for a long time, Be spontaneously fulfilled; Please grant soon the good fortune to enjoy The happy celebration of spiritual with the temporal rule (excerpt) Full text of the prayer is available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tib/trueword.htm>.

the Chinese embassies across the world on 10 March each year with pictures of HH Dalai Lama and his speech. This exercise helps the Diaspora in imaging the Tibetan nation.

#### **IV. Crisis of Identity: The Struggle**

Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and violence The Illusion of Destiny* has remarked that the conception of identity influences, in many different ways, our thoughts and actions<sup>21</sup>. The world is increasingly becoming a federation of religion, ethnicity, status etc. In the process one tends to over look the various other ways one can see oneself. It shows a tendency to see oneself in a singular and over reaching system of partitioning in the lines of regionalism, religion, and ethnicity. Though this yields a solitarist approach to human identity the reality of it cannot be denied.

In the day to day life, though an individual is a member of variety of groups such as of a particular ancestry, religion, a liberal, of a particular gender, an author, theatre lover, environmental activist and et.al., the issue of citizenship, that of belonging to a nation remains a matter of primary importance. For this is the fundamental determinant of all the human and humane rights of existence. This identification with a nation is the anvil upon which the very existence of the personhood depends.

Though Sen is of the opinion that “our shared identity gets savagely challenged when manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification-in terms of religion or community or culture or nation or civilisation treating each uniquely powerful into that particular context of war and peace”<sup>22</sup>.

While the above is true in some contexts, in some communitarian thinking- especially the Tibetan context-one’s identity with one’s community must be principal or dominant identity one has coupled with a citizenship of the country of asylum or emigration. This, it must be admitted, is also the conditioning of several generations in exile and the resultant thinking process. This severe and perpetual limitation has taken the form of strong assertions that is now somewhat weakened by the Middle Path Approach.

With the talk’s breakdown with China, it was decided to internationalise the Tibetan issue. Critical to this was the role the Diaspora would be playing in lobbying in their respective country of location. Challenge was the small size of the Diaspora and the formidable powers of

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<sup>21</sup> Penguin Books, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence The Illusion of Destiny*, Penguin Books, 2006, Pages i-xiii & 32-36

the opponents. Tibetan activists have tried to make powerful alliance with the celebrity human rights and indigenous rights activists across the world. In this process an interesting combination emerges in that they use western language of human rights while invoking the spirituality and mysticism of the new age movement. During 1986-1987, after the negotiations in London, New York, and Washington D. C., a network of activists emerged who worked in support of HH Dalai Lama and his Middle Path Approach. Popularly called the “Tibet Lobby”, effective public relation was sought to be established. During the same time there was Chinese crack down in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on the anniversary of 1959 revolt. A westerner who witnessed the crackdown returned home to establish the International Campaign for Tibet which today serves as the umbrella organisation for all movements for Tibet<sup>23</sup>. A significant development has been a slight downplay of the religious element in order to attract the leftist lobby. A narrative of Tibet as the guardian of the sacred Texts that contain key to Enlightenment in the materialistic consumer driven world is built up. To attract human rights activists the narrative of oppressed and victimised Tibet is built up. The Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in Exile [now CTA] wrote in 1995:

“Our struggle is not primarily an ethic or political struggle ...our ultimate goal is the preservation, maintenance and dissemination of the sublime cultural traditions of unique inner sciences for the sake of all sentient beings. However without proper means favourable conditions, it is not possible for us to fulfil this responsibility. We must therefore first undertake the spiritual practice of liberating Tibet without delay”<sup>24</sup>.

Such universalisation of the Tibetan cause in alliance with Tibetan Buddhism has been successful in drawing the non Tibetan activist to the Tibetan cause. It has also successfully aligned itself with concerns like human rights, environmentalism and peace which has successfully animated contemporary movements. His Holiness Dalai Lama after receiving the Nobel Prize for peace has been able to articulate the Tibet issue at the UN that has successfully inserted the Tibet issue into the debates of the UN Committee on Human Rights. During the 1990s & 2000s HH Dalai Lama has played a central role in free Tibet movements and has been able to dialogue with US Presidents, gaining access to the Voice of America during

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<sup>23</sup> Tom A. Grundfeld, *The making of Modern Tibet*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996

<sup>24</sup> Samdhong Losang Tenzin Rimpoché, *Satyagraha*, (Dharmshala: Tibetan Government in Exile, 1995) Full text in English available at <http://tibet.dharmakara.net/tibBull-TibRef5.html>.

the Bush regime, House of Representatives unanimously condemned the human rights violation in Tibet<sup>25</sup>.

Given the diminutive size of Tibetan Diaspora, the movement for free Tibet has gained some considerable momentum due to an effective marketing design<sup>26</sup>. But the essence of the Tibetan cause has been somewhat diluted in the process, leaving the hard liners vulnerable to the consequences of the action of the allies who do not have their best interest at heart.

## V. The Closing Words

The aim and purpose of this paper is to explore the paradigm shifts that have taken place in the way in which the Tibetan Cause has been dealt with over the years. The shift has been from hard core radicalist approach to the ethnic bargaining to the Middle Path Approach. The less religious approach of projecting the Tibetan Cause for the keepers of the sacred text of Universal enlightenment, and from thence to the more secular human rights, environmental issues – has been a long journey of sixty years.

The paper also shows how the Tibetan leadership in exile strategically helped the Diaspora to ally the non-Tibetans with their cause by skilfully blending their cause with the popular narratives of human rights and environment and attaching a Buddhist religious flavour to the same.

Inside this larger canvas of the struggle for identity has been the personal struggle of the innumerable individuals who have crossed continents in search of personal identities. The Tibetan story, like many other story, is in several layers where individuals have despaired the violence, have borne the pain of the loss of the loved ones both in violence and during the exodus, it is the story of the young adults who are on a journey in search of their destiny.

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<sup>25</sup> Erin K. Jenne, Sanctifying the Homeland: Religionising the Tibetan and Jewish Diasporas, International Relations and European Studies Department, Central European University, Nodur u. 9 Budapest 1051 Hungary, Jennee@ceu.hu

<sup>26</sup> Notable celebrity activists have joined the Tibetan cause include Harrison Ford, Adam Yuach from the Beastie Boys as well as Abe Baldwin, Barbara Streisand, Todd Oldman, Oliver Stone, Sharon Stone, William Dafoe, Dennis Quaid, Meg Ryan et al. Big budget movies like *Kundan*, *Seven Years in Tibet* have been made, News papers, publications like Tibet Press watch, Tibet Forum etc. have successfully held the attention of the Tibetans and the Non-Tibetans alike. See Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of a Rebellion: Insurgents Media and International Activism*, Cambridge University Press 2005