

Identity Crisis in a Cross-cultural Paradox: My Experience

Sonam Choden Bhutia

Abstract: *“Identity” is a sum total of perceptions one accepts, imbibes and is fostered on by the society. It is related to both ascribed and acquired social constructs like caste, class, religion and language. Though caste, class, religion are important components of a person’s identity it is through language that the unique ethnic, social, religion and cultural identity is expressed. Language in both written and spoken form is the factor that binds other components of a person’s identity and it is crucial for cultural preservation.*

Related to the issue of cultural preservation, one finds the role of language especially in case of Tibetan identity. Despite the Chinese insistence that Tibet has always been a part of China, the Tibetan religion, customs, culture and language preserve distinctive features supporting the right to self-determination and independence. In exile, Tibetans under the guidance of His Holiness Dalai Lama have been successful in keeping their identity alive. However, in the recent times, the fear of losing their identity is specially felt when there is a shift away from Tibetan language; with many scattered around the world the Tibetans are under pressure to adopt languages other than their mother tongue.

Sociologically, it is stated that endogamous marriage helps in preserving racial purity and culture. Tibetans marrying outside the community face many challenges of which one is the problem of identity. As a daughter of Tibetan father, a Bhutanese mother and the wife of a Sikkimese Bhutia, the confusion arises as to where I, as an individual, stand and face Identity crisis in certain situations in my everyday life. Starting from my experience as a person faced with multiple identity “tags”, the paper attempts to bring forth issues and dilemmas of identity faced by children of mixed parentage. It also highlights the challenges and issues of identity that come up in inter-community marriages.

Keywords: Identity, culture, language, Tibetans, cultural preservation, identity crisis, multiple identities, intercommunity marriage.

“Identity” is a sum total of perceptions one accepts, imbibes and is fostered on by the society. It is related to both ascribed and acquired social constructs

like caste, class, religion and language. Though caste, class, religion are important components of a person's identity it is through language that the unique ethnic, social, religion and cultural identity is expressed. Language in both written and spoken form is the factor that binds other components of a person's identity and it is crucial for cultural preservation.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, the term "identity" means the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. It is found in different forms in societies like in the form of caste, class, religion, language and so on. Language and social identity are often linked together as it is generally perceived that language defines an individual's identity. So, learning and preserving one's language is vital. Identifying oneself through language is witnessed in our everyday life which is commonly linked with adolescence. The ability to speak many languages is important for inter-cultural relations as it is an expression of one's unique cultural identity.

The role of sociologists is to talk about issues which plague the fabric of our society. Identity is one such issue. This paper will bring forth issues and dilemmas that face a child of mixed parentage; it would also highlight the challenges and issues of identity that come up in inter-community marriages.

I have decided to narrate my experiences with an understanding that like me, there could be many other individuals with the similar background, who are also silently experiencing the challenges of identity.

In my search for an identity through self-reflection I try and reconcile my different identity tags with reality. Each one of us has a story of where we come from, our lineage and heritage, and so on.

My father is a Tibetan who came to Sikkim in the early 1960s. He settled in Dharma Chakra Centre, Rumtek, which is a small Tibetan settlement in Rumtek set up by His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa in 1961. My mother, a Shartshok Bhutanese had also come to Sikkim in the mid-60s with her family settled in the periphery of Rumtek monastery. The monastery has been an integral part of our lives and the religion was the binding force. I was born and brought up in Rumtek. The Tibetans, especially those who came and settled after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, are referred to as "refugees" by the host community in Sikkim. The memories of my childhood are rather pleasant as the monastery and its administration took care of the lay community in the area. The language spoken was mostly Tibetan and after the demise of my mother in 1981, I lived with my maternal grandparents who gave me the opportunity to learn

and speak Bhutanese language. In the settlement, both the male and female members would be actively involved in the domestic chores and in the activities of the monastery. The children of the lay people were sent to many missionary schools and Public schools for education in Gangtok, Pakyong, Darjeeling and Kalimpong by the monastery with the help of western sponsorship. I was fortunate to get an opportunity to go to a Christian missionary school for education. The boarding life in a community environment helped me to be independent. I do not remember a single moment where I experienced any kind of discrimination because of my identity. This is because at that age, we were residing in a community where traits of learning, hard work, honesty and respect were valued and emphasized.

However, later, when I came back home in Dharma Chakra Centre, Rumtek, after my graduation, I began to observe the difference with not much knowledge and realisation that there was hardly any interaction between the Tibetans and the local Bhutias. It was a closed clustered populated area. The road to Sang Martam demarcated the area as Tibetans lived above the road and the Bhutias lived below the road. Though both Bhutias and Tibetans gathered in the monastery on various religious occasions, there was hardly any social interaction between the members of the two communities beyond the monastery. Notwithstanding religious and cultural similarity, the Tibetans were perceived as “different”, the “other”. This “other” notion is generally used to maintain the existence of a group (Cinoglu and Arikan 2012). This distinctive phenomenon is the hallmark of the area. I observed that the host community looked down upon Tibetans and referred to them as “Bhodpa refugees”. Most of the Tibetans have retained their Tibetan identity and many have also naturalized themselves as Indians by virtue of their birth and naturalization. In December, 2010, when an India-born Tibetan woman challenged India’s Ministry of External Affairs in the Delhi High Court for denying her an Indian passport, the court ruled in her favour. The Court held that Tibetans born in India on or after 26th January 1950 but before 1st July 1987 regardless of their parentage enjoy birthright citizenship (High Court of Delhi 2010). The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued directions that Tibetan applicants born in India between January 26th, 1950 and July 1st 1987 be treated as Indian citizen by birth’ (*Hindustan Times*, 8 November 2017).

After my marriage in 2004 to a Sikkimese Bhutia, I moved to Gangtok. During the initial period of my marriage, I experienced a peculiar sense of belongingness to which I did not pay much heed as at that moment my intense love and affection for my husband refused to see anything else but

to be happy with the thought of being together for lifetime. Love was in the air and nothing mattered to me at that moment. My paternal aunt had come all the way from Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, for the wedding but she did not seem too happy as I was getting married to a non-Tibetan. She could not accept that I, being the only child in the family with good educational background, was marrying a local Bhutia. My father did not have any objection; he was in fact very happy for me, the reason being his own “good” experience of inter-community marriage. My aunt dissuaded my father and my relatives from wearing brocade attire for the wedding. It was symbolic protest. In Gangtok, I had overheard some people from the neighbourhood telling that my husband had married a “Bhodpa”, meaning Tibetan and not a Bhutia. As I became exposed to the society in Gangtok, I began to realize that Tibetans were considered to be different and were regarded as “refugees”. At times, the word “refugee” is used in a derogatory manner which reflected the general assumption about the Tibetans being self centred, business-minded and calculative. Some Sikkimese were, however, of appreciation of the Tibetan way of life, their hard-working nature, self-determination and dedication to one’s identity and culture.

As a Tibetan I made it a point to converse in Tibetan language with fellow Tibetans whenever I interacted with them. However, to my surprise when I first settled in Gangtok, I found that most of the Sikkimese Bhutias were conversing with each other in Nepali language. After the birth of my son, my mother-in-law suggested that every member of our family should speak only in Bhutia language. Others were quite well conversed with the language but for me it was new although it seemed quite similar to Tibetan language. So along with my son I learnt to speak the Bhutia language. For me it was good as I could speak Tibetan, Bhutanese and now Bhutia language. Occasionally I would try to speak in Tibetan with my son but it was discouraged in the family, perhaps for the established notion that the child should learn the father’s language, and not the mother’s and I had to concede. This I felt was the effect of the prescribed gender roles and norms that exist in the formation of identity. I began to realize that the socialization process is crafted in a way to accommodate the patriarchal concerns, which fostered the superiority of males. I gave in to the idea willingly and made sure that we converse in Bhutia language only. However, during my visits to Rumtek, many Tibetans would remind me of my roots and they would advise me to teach Tibetan language to my children which I never took seriously. My maternal family would tell me to teach Bhutanese language to my children. Despite these pressures, even after my daughter was born, Bhutia was the only language used in the family. However, during

my last visit to Dharamshala I met many of my Tibetan relatives who emphasized that I and my children speak Tibetan in order to preserve the Tibetan language and culture as they feel that some Tibetans in exile, like me, are neglecting their Tibetan identity. To compound my dilemma my Bhutanese relatives pressurize me to speak Bhutanese and preserve my links with Bhutanese culture. Sandwiched and bewildered between these conflicting demands of languages and cultures, I began to feel the need for self-reflection. I realized that I am a Tibetan in the company of my Tibetan relatives and a Bhutanese amidst my Bhutanese relatives and a Bhutia while in Gangtok. My husband, on the other hand, seems to be free from all these conflicting identity demands. It is probably because he is a man and a Sikkimese in his own homeland. I being an ordinary woman, play multiple roles in my efforts to please everyone in the game. I try in vain to define my identity amidst conflicting identity demands. Hence, I live in identity crisis perpetually.

According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, the definition of identity crisis is a personal psycho-social conflict especially in adolescence that involves confusion about one's social role and after a sense of loss of continuity to one's personality. Similarly, Erik Erikson describes an identity crisis as a period of intense exploration of different roles and aspects of the self. Whitbourne has pointed out that an "identity crisis" may occur at any time in your adult years when an individual is faced with a challenge to her sense of self. In addition, not every adolescent goes through an identity crisis; instead, she/he accepts the roles and values handed down by his or her parents (Whitbourne 2010).

As a Sikkimese Tibetan, I am no longer a refugee. My identity now is that of a mother, wife, daughter-in-law. But my father as a Tibetan insists that I should speak Tibetan language and follow Tibetan traditions. I find it difficult because I cannot associate myself with Tibet as I have not seen Tibet. So, who am I? I speak Bhutanese language but I do not live in Bhutan, so who am I? I speak Bhutia language as I am married to a Bhutia and a born Indian but still people look at me differently. Again, I cannot forget my Tibetan roots and I can easily identify myself for the Tibetan issues. So, this kind of unresolved crisis left me struggling to locate my "self". I realise that these confusions were hindering my personality development with no strong sense of identity and confidence.

Freud mentions that the identity of woman is determined biologically. Women mostly wonder as 'Where am I? What am I doing here?' Women are becoming aware of an identity crisis in their own lives, a crisis which began

many generations ago, has grown worse with each succeeding generation and will not end until women themselves and their daughters give their lives a new image which the women now so desperately need. I think women had to suffer this crisis of identity, the problem that is unspoken; apparently the problem that has no names which began a hundred years ago, and have to suffer even today, simply to become fully human (Friedan 1963).

Experiencing such identity crisis in certain situations of my everyday life leaves me confused. Psychological distress with no clear sense of self and such confusion makes me insecure and uncertain about my true role. As a result, I lack the sense of intense patriotism to Tibet unlike the ones who are pure born Tibetans.

Sometimes, the fear of losing my Tibetan identity engulfs me when there is a shift in domains of language use, culture and immediate community or family and kinship environment. When I am in the company of fellow Tibetans the fear increases even more. One Tibetan lady from my hometown but now settled in America who is married to a Tibetan always boasts of her origin and her family in front of me, who is married to a non-Tibetan while she and her son are both pure Tibetans. She would take pride of the fact that they have maintained the racial purity while blaming me for diluting it. She makes me feel uncomfortable and awkward forcing me to negotiate and compromise with conflicting identity demands in my everyday life existence.

Mishra in her book *Tibetan Refugees in India* (2014) has observed:

Tibetan youth identity, educational and occupational aspirations in exile is at the same time to be understood as processes of negotiation and compromise and not as something given or fixed in time and space. Tibetan youth in India have diverse ways of defining and interpreting ways of 'being Tibetan' in their own lives. They are not passive, disempowered but recipients of diverse cultures in exile. They are actually straddling dialogic forms of Tibetan and mixed multicultural identities, rather than living out one uniform, monolithic way of being Tibetan.

Therefore, as a part of my existential strategy I reconcile with my conflicting emotions and dilemmas, perceiving that I am a product of multi-cultural environment and a person with split identity or mixed identity.

References

- Cinoglu and Arikan. 2012. 'Self, identity and identity formation: From the perspectives of three major theories'. Volume: 9 Issue: 2 Year:2012, International Journal of Human Sciences. <https://www.j-humansciences.com/ojs/index.php/IJHS/article/view/2429/972> as accessed on 14-03-18
- High Court of Delhi. 2010. "Namgyal Dolkar versus Government of India, Ministry Of External Affairs", <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/AddReading/2013/NAMGYAL%20DOLKAR%20Case.pdf>
- [https://www.merriam-webster.com/identity crisis](https://www.merriam-webster.com/identity%20crisis) as accessed on 07-10-17
- Whitbourne, S. K. 2010. *The Search for Fulfillment*. New York: Ballantine Books
- Friedan, Betty. 1963. 'The Feminine Mystique'. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Mishra, Mallica. 2014. *Tibetan Refugees in India: Education, Culture and Growing Up in Exile*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited.