

Cultural Hybridity of the India-Born Tibetans in Sikkim

Sonam Choden Bhutia

Abstract: *This paper examines the evolution of cultural identity within the Tibetan community, specifically focusing on the Indian-born younger generation Tibetans currently residing in Sikkim. Records of previous studies on the Tibetan exile experience have centred on the preservation of culture and identity as a form of political resistance. However, this paper is based on the cultural hybridity emerging among younger Tibetans.*

Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity", this study utilises a qualitative methodology incorporating quasi-ethnography and observations using semi-structured interviews. The paper aims to explore their linguistic, food and other socio-cultural aspects that shape hybrid identity and culture in exile. The findings suggest that by blending traditional Tibetan values with Western and Indian influences, Tibetan youth are not experiencing cultural erosion. Instead, they are engaging in a strategic hybridity that ensures the survival of Tibetan culture and identity, revealing a structure and agency relationship. The paper concludes that this hybrid cultural identity serves as a powerful coping mechanism in allowing a population of displaced backgrounds to negotiate and maintain their social existence in society.

Keywords: Tibetan community, Cultural Hybridity, Strategic Hybrid Identity, Negotiation, Social existence.

Introduction

Migration is not just the movement of people from one place to another but also a continuous process of transformation. Migrants have to deal with challenges of retaining their shared values and norms (Brinkerhoff, 2012), and in the process, acculturation imposes the new values of the host society; personal identities become multicultural identities (Werbner & Modood, 2015). Pathak (2003) also mentioned that the migratory trends lead to many

changes in the life space of individuals in the host society. In the context of Tibetans, who fled Tibet in 1959 after the Chinese occupation, have been residing in India and other parts of the world for more than six decades (Ahmad, 2012); their socio-cultural life has also changed through education and new experiences in exile (Norbu, 2001). In the process of migration and resettlement, the issues of socio-cultural change in the life world and identity emerge with exposure to the host society.

The Tibetan experience in exile represents a profound paradox in social science. On the one hand, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala has implemented a strict policy of cultural preservation to prevent the erosion of Tibetan identity. On the other hand, three to four generations of Tibetans have now been born outside their homeland, creating a hybrid identity that is simultaneously Tibetan, Indian, and at times both Indian and Tibetan. The weight of the two worlds of displacement and the spirit of resilience of the Tibetans is interwoven, which is not just about mixing but about a new space where migrants negotiate their identity and thus hybridity occurs (Bhabha, 1994). Such hybridisation results in a multi-cultural identity which is to a great extent influenced by globalisation (Brinkerhoff, 2012). Hybridity is more common among youth as they are more exposed to the globalised cultural environment. The trends of globalisation bring massive cultural transformations influencing self-identification (Kennedy & Danks, 2001). The continuous interplay of local and global weakens cultural tradition (Giddens, 1991), giving space to the mixing of cultures. They (Bhabha, 1994; Brinkerhoff, 2012) argue that culture is not a static entity but fluid and in motion, characterised by change and interconnectedness, where the members negotiate hybrid identities. Thus, migration is rarely a process of total assimilation or rigid preservation; instead, it is a creative and often negotiated process of belonging leading to the hybridisation of culture.

The idea of cultural hybridity has gained attention among scholars in recent years across various disciplines in order to understand how the mixing of cultures shapes an individual in society. Contextualising for Tibetans, Dukes (2006) posits that Tibetan identity is constructed through various forces, creating a complex network of imaginary and genuine connections with multiple communities in exile; this leads to hybrid or fragmented identities, which are negotiated and of a shifting nature. This argument corresponds to the findings of Mishra (2014) that Tibetan youth identity is not fixed or predetermined but rather a dynamic process of negotiation and compromise. Rigzin (2016) further revealed the process of cultural and identity assimilation

of the Tibetans as an unavoidable natural process, revealing the changing nature of identity, which is fluid and in motion (Bhabha, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the cultural hybridisation of Indian-born Tibetans in Sikkim and to highlight their linguistic, food and other socio-cultural aspects that shape hybrid identity and culture in everyday life. It is based on a qualitative methodology incorporating quasi- ethnographic fieldwork and observations conducted between 2022 and 2024 in their natural setting in Sikkim. Field data, along with secondary literature, have been used in this paper.

Tibetan Cultural Symbolism: Language, Food, Clothing

Language is not just a medium of communication but a window to the rich cultural heritage of Tibet (Chukki, 2020) and traditional knowledge of a society, which contributes to the preservation of its unique traditions, memory, expressions and beliefs. The Tibetan language is one of the world's oldest and richest languages (Arya, 2022). Historically, the [Tibetans](#) belong to the same linguistic family as the Burmese (Bell, 1998). Over the years, spoken Tibetan has developed a pattern of regional [dialects](#) and subdialects, which can be mutually understood. Tibetan, of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages, is the written language used throughout Tibet (TP & PRC, 2007). The [dialect](#) of [Lhasa](#) is used as a [lingua franca](#).

Historically, Kharat (2003) claims that India had a significant influence on Tibetan culture and language. Tibetan script was derived from the Sanskrit script of the Indian Gupta period by the scholar Thonmi Sambhota, who was sent to India by King Song-Tsan-Gam-Po. Upon his return, Thonmi invented the Tibetan alphabet and became the first grammarian of Tibet (Kachru, 1950). This was possible due to the strong historical, religious, and cultural ties between Tibet and India (Lama, 2016; Bernstorff & Von Welck, 2003). Today, the Tibetan language is widely used not only in Tibet but also in most of the Himalayan regions of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim (Arya, 2022).

Food as a marker of identity is often most potent, yet it may be unnoticed in society; it builds memories and provides vital insights into people's feelings of belonging to a homeland. Tibetans also have unique culinary traditions. *Tsampa*, or roasted barley flour, is an exceptional food of the Tibetans. It is a staple food, similar to rice and bread in other cultures. It is unique to Tibetan culture, as it is very easy to carry, store, and eat, making it especially

suitable for nomads, military personnel, and travellers. Tsampa symbolises Tibetanness, as most Tibetans believe that “tsampa eating people” is synonymous with “Tibetan” (Lhamo, 1997). Butter tea is the most popular drink, consumed by everyone at any moment, whether resting, chatting, or working, and is often drunk in large quantities. Butter and butter tea are closely associated with every aspect of Tibetan villagers’ lives, as they are the basic traditional drink in daily life and also an essential liquid for eating tsampa. The customs related to butter tea constitute an important foundation of community life among the Tibetans (Dorje, 2009; Changjiang, 2008). Traditional Tibetan food typically consists of yak meat, mutton, beef, butter, cheese, tea, vegetables, and fruits when available. Soup is one of the favourite dishes of Tibetans. Meat and barley are the primary food items, and meat can be preserved for several years due to the cold climate in Tibet. Green vegetables are very scarce and hence very costly. Other vegetables, such as *Yung-ma*, Turnips, *La-phu*, radish, and *Sema*, are cultivated, and potatoes are also available. Many types of wild vegetables, such as various mushrooms and asparagus, are also found. Many medicinal roots and herbs are found alongside fruits such as pear, apricot, walnut, pomegranate, apple, strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, and gooseberry (Lhamo, 1997; Bell, 1998). Tea and beer are the chief national beverages of Tibet. Tibetans prepare tea by boiling the tea leaves. The mixture is then churned, and butter and salt are added to it. Beer or *Chang* is the alcoholic drink prepared by them. Well-to-do families have their breweries, and both Tibetan men and women drink it, as it is served on all important occasions. Smoking is prohibited by religion, particularly for monks; however, snuff is very popular (Kachru, 1950).

Clothing also exhibits diverse levels of cultural symbolism as markers of cultural identity (Angu, 2008). Tibetan dresses for both men and women are distinct, and the dress plays a significant role in the lives of the Tibetans (Bell, 1998). The Tibetan dress of both sexes and all classes in Tibet consists of a full gown called a *chu-pa*, characterised by a high collar and long sleeves. Materials such as wool, cotton, silk, and brocade are used, and the costumes of males are also as bright and costly as those of women. In summer, they wear ordinary Tibetan cloth *truk* or silk, and in winter, the gown is made of sheepskin or cloth lined with lambskin or wadded cotton. It is tied around the waist with broader and larger pockets for carrying drinking cups called ‘*pho-pa*’ and other items. The robe for laymen reaches to the knee, for priests and women to the ankle. Silk gowns feature collars made of fur in various styles. In central Tibet and parts of eastern Tibet, women wear aprons called *pangdan*, which are woven in varied colours

and often so broad that they nearly meet at the back (Bell, 1998). Such cultural symbolism of Tibetans among the younger generation who are born in India necessitates exploration.

Discussions and Analysis

Tibetans, despite being integrated in a web of different social structures and relationships in exile, continue to maintain and articulate Tibetan cultural identity through language, food habits, clothing and religious practices. The prevalence of distinct Tibetan cultural traits among respondents across generations is observed from the field data in Sikkim, indicating preservation and continuity of Tibetan cultural heritage. Drawing from Giddens' theory of structuration, their cultural patterns of behaviour are seen to be reproduced by themselves, revealing the constraining nature of Tibetan social structure, while at the same time they are acting as agents who can use their agency in making choices while taking actions even in the face of structural constraints. Such interplay of structure and agency is evident in the reproduction of identity by the Tibetans in the following socio-cultural domain of everyday life.

(a) Language

The Tibetan language is one of the world's oldest and richest languages (Arya, 2022). Scholars (Phuntsog, 2018; Saikia, 2023) have highlighted the fear among the Tibetans in exile about their language being diluted inside Tibet under the oppressive policies of the Chinese. In the context of Tibetans in exile, Tibetan people, as well as the Tibetan government, prioritise language preservation to maintain their cultural identity. MacPherson (2011) also stated that young Tibetans in exile, particularly in India, are deeply rooted in their traditional language, along with expertise in Hindi and English. The following narrations make it more evident the significance of language in the preservation of cultural identity. A female respondent belonging to the first generation of Indian-born Tibetan emphasises preserving the Tibetan language as she feels that the Chinese are destroying the Tibetan culture in Tibet. Expressing her concern about the need to preserve the language, she said:

Language is the main charm of our identity, and we have to use and speak the Tibetan language only; if we don't speak, then we will lose the essence of our identity. These days, most young Tibetans of the present generation use other languages like the English language, which I do not encourage.

Similar commitment to the need for language preservation was observed in a respondent who is 41 years old, and despite living in a metropolitan city like Delhi for more than two decades, she interacts with her family members only in Tibetan and also wants every Tibetan to preserve the language. Emphasising the role of family and individual responsibility for Tibetans to maintain their identity, she focused on preserving their language. The respondent, in contrast, shared her concerns about young Tibetans in exile slowly losing their grip on the language as they feel that using the English language has become a marker of modernity. She laments that such Tibetans are neglecting their Tibetan language in their quest for acceptance in the host society, as well as finding a new space in modern society.

English is predominantly used, and as such, the younger generation of Tibetans manifested multilingual skills, possessing hybrid linguistic practices, with fluency in the Nepali language, which some of them could even read and write. The Hindi language was another language that the majority of the younger Tibetans spoke and understood, primarily due to the influence of Indian social media, and they had learned the language in school as a third language. The language skills and expertise in English, Hindi, and Nepali made their visits to other places outside Sikkim much easier and more convenient in everyday social interactions with other communities. Similarly, Bhuchung (2023) also highlighted the linguistic skills and knowledge of exile-born Tibetan youth, which empower them to negotiate their culture and identity in exile (Bhoil, 2011).

Overall, language, as the most important marker of Tibetan identity, is being preserved and continued, while at the same time, the pervasive influence of Nepali, Hindi, and English languages was observed among younger Tibetans in Sikkim, reproducing cultural hybridity.

(b) Food Habits and Clothing

Food and clothing function as powerful tools for cultural identity, and these parameters of cultural symbolism, as argued by Saikia (2023), are prioritised by Tibetans in exile primarily due to the fear of Tibet being non-existent. Such attributes carry memories of traditional culture, which finds relevance with Changjiang (2008), who stated Tibetans as ‘Tsampa’ eating people, revealing food as an essential marker of identity. The narrations of respondents reflected the Tibetan cultural identity being articulated through food habits and clothing. Like in the case of one first-generation respondent, she stressed wearing Tibetan traditional clothes in its entire form and not wearing it partially because she feels that most young Tibetans do not

wear the complete set of the traditional attire comprising the *hunju* (blouse), *Chuba* (gown-like dress), *pangdhen* (striped apron which married women generally wear) and some conventional hair accessories and ornaments. In Sikkim, younger Tibetans are mostly wearing the *chuba* with western shirts and tops, revealing a kind of mixing of tradition and modernity. Even while talking about food, she said, “My choice of food is only Tibetan food. My day begins with butter tea and *tsampa*. I love to eat the *bhalep* (Tibetan bread), *Thukpa* of any variety that is Tibetan in nature.” Such an act of preference of the respondent indicates her sense of preserving and continuing her Tibetan cultural identity.

Here, it is observed that food is not only consumed for nourishment, but it also assimilates memories of home and social connection to group identity. On the other hand, Tibetans belonging to the second and third generation, Indian born in Sikkim, reported consuming the staple food of Tibet only occasionally, and some did not have a taste for it. The field data revealed respondents consuming the popular food available in Sikkim, like rice, dal, vegetables, and sometimes non-veg items of chicken, fish, etc. Today, Tibetans are found to be mostly avoiding the food of Tibet, such as red meat, butter, and dried meat, due to health conditions. Drinking ‘Chang’ (a special millet-brewed drink) was also not so popular, but they reported consuming it during the New Year (Losar) festival only. Even drinking butter tea, which used to be an everyday beverage, was found to be reduced by the majority of the respondents.

In terms of traditional clothes, Tibetans in the study reported wearing their traditional attire mainly during festivals, important social occasions and while visiting monasteries. However, Tibetan women were found to be wearing their traditional clothes almost on daily basis. Western clothes and Indian wear were also widely adopted in everyday life due to comfort, convenience and fashion, which revealed the impact of global culture that had penetrated their everyday life, indicating a change. Furthermore, to fit into the new context of the host society with the passage of time, Tibetan males were found to be wearing western casual clothes with cotton fabric shirts with a blend of traditional Tibetan style, revealing how the Tibetans navigate between two worlds to maintain balance in continuity and change processes.

An emerging interest and exposure of the younger generations in non-traditional and foreign forms of music like Western, Nepali, Bollywood Hindi and, more recently, Korean dramas and pop music was found, indicating a multicultural hybrid life in exile reproducing cultural hybridity (Homi Bhabha) greatly influenced by globalisation.

Nonetheless, a second-generation 40-year-old male emphasised the importance of preserving Tibetan culture and traditions, underscoring the responsibility of every member of the community in retaining the food and clothing traditions of Tibetans. He also expressed a strong belief that no external force, not even the Chinese, can erase the sense of belonging and collective identity of Tibetans. To put it in his words, “Chinese may have taken our land, but they can never uproot our feelings and connection for Tibet, which is deeply ingrained within us through our culture.”

There are many instances where respondents have shown strong embeddedness in their belief in preserving their traditional clothing and food habits. Simultaneously, there were respondents whose narrations revealed a different side of the story that reflected how they are navigating their everyday lives between two cultures. A male respondent shared about wearing casual clothes mostly because he opined that it is quite impractical and unusual in Sikkim for Tibetan men to wear their traditional attire in their everyday life. They would only wear the shirt very often and wear the full chuba set during festivals and special occasions only. More preference for casual western clothes was revealed in their daily wear, as they were found to be prioritising comfort over traditional style. This depicts a kind of adaptation strategy in the modern world among the male respondents that is both intentional and unintentional in their everyday lives.

Another respondent, a 30-year-old female, also revealed her experience as somewhat mixed in a cross-cultural environment. She shared, “The food pattern in my family is mostly Tibetan alongside rice, dal and achar. Clothing-wise, I enjoy wearing traditional attire and also appreciate the comfort and fashion of wearing western clothes.” Her desire for modern makeup and beauty care was also reflected in her appearance and style. This case, therefore, revealed the situation of the Tibetans in the present context, where they are found to be influenced by traditional and modern aspects of everyday life. Young Tibetans in exile are therefore caught between two worlds, navigating to maintain balance in cultural preservation as well as adaptation in Sikkimese society.

The hybrid situation of Tibetans is also reflected in the following narration. According to a second-generation Tibetan born in India, aged 34 years old male shared:

I describe my national identity as both Tibetan and Indian because, by blood, I am a Tibetan, but by birth, I am an Indian. I have only lived in India and therefore feel I am more of an Indian now. Whenever positive

occurrences take place in India, such as the victory of the Indian cricket team in World Cup tournaments, India winning in Football matches, etc., they make me feel very proud and happy. But when India faces negative situations, I feel very sad. I sing the national anthem, and I salute the Indian national flag with great honour and pride, which manifests my sense of nationalism for India. My Tibetanness is again intact in my language, food habits and Tibetan religion of Buddhism.

The blending of cultural practices and social ties with the host country by young Tibetans has reproduced their identity as mixed or hybrid. Contextually, the fragmented national identification of younger generation respondents as both Tibetan and Indian is not only based on identity documents but also on shared culture, reflecting a fluid sense of identity which lends credence to Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, which is a fragmented sense of self. Tibetan respondents revealed having a strong sense of patriotism for India on occasions of Republic Day and Indian Independence Day, which they expressed by displaying the Indian National flag at home. Their Indianness also unfolds while cheering and celebrating Indian teams in various sports events, and the younger generation Tibetans reported enjoying themselves while engaging in multicultural events, festivals like Holi and Diwali and Indian fairs. Alongside the great enthusiasm for India, there are contexts where they are differentiated and categorised as foreigners or refugees in India, prompting more feelings for Tibet. The preferences for Tibetan traditions, food, and celebrations appear to be evoking their sense of Tibetanness in their everyday life. These shifts in identities were connected to complex situations of respondents shaping their identities and roles. A fragmented sense of identity and roles of younger Tibetans revealed their proposed action of negotiation for a sense of security and livelihood in everyday life. The hybridity, therefore, is not just a cultural blend; it is a negotiation of survival.

Conclusion

The cultural hybridity among younger generation Tibetans in Sikkim is not merely a byproduct of displacement but a proactive strategy of negotiation and new identity formation in the host society. Their hybrid identity situation aligns with the theory of cultural hybridity of Homi Bhabha (1994), reproducing cultural hybridisation in their everyday life. The multilingual nature of young Tibetans in Sikkim, with fluency in the English language, Nepali language, Hindi language, along with their Tibetan language being intact, shows hybrid characteristics representing a blend of Tibetan heritage

and influences of the host society. The hybridity of the younger Tibetans in Sikkim suggests that 'home' is no longer a static point on a map, but a set of values and cultural connections.

Overall, it is observed that Tibetans in Sikkim are mindful and quite vigilant regarding the importance of their cultural preservation, primarily for fear of losing their identity as Tibetans outside Tibet. Tibetan youth are therefore not experiencing cultural erosion. Instead, they are engaging in a strategic hybridity to ensure the survival of Tibetan culture and identity and as a powerful coping mechanism in allowing a population of displaced background to negotiate and maintain their social existence in society.

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