

Construction and Negotiation of Identities among the Tibetan Refugees in India

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Abstract: *Tibetans fled Tibet after the Chinese occupation of the country in the year 1959. Tibetans have been living in exile for more than six decades and a large number of Tibetans have been born in host country India. Refugee hood of the Tibetans in India is a complex issue. Nonetheless, Tibetans born in India, are allowed to seek citizenship as per the enactment of the Indian Citizenship Act (Amendment) of 1986, which allows for acquiring of Indian citizenship by anyone born in India between January 26, 1950, and July 1, 1987. This has made a large section of the second and third generation Tibetans eligible for Indian citizenship. The young Tibetans are showing great interest in taking up Indian citizenship for many practical reasons; they want to have a secure livelihood and social existence and get rid of the confusions and dilemma among them over their sense of belongingness. No group of people can live with confusions about their identity or belongingness. This paper, therefore, has made an attempt to understand the Tibetans' sense of belongingness by recording their personal narratives of their experiences in their everyday life. The paper locates the Tibetans living in India in terms of construction and negotiation of their identity vis-à-vis Indian citizens in their everyday life.*

Keywords: Tibetans, Indian citizenship, identity dilemma, sense of belongingness, negotiations.

Introduction

Identity and identification are important matters in human life. It shows who we are and who we are seen to be which greatly matters for social existence. The question of identity is too complex

in nature, the discourse and debates on identity have become issues of theoretical contestations in social science (Haddock & Sutch 2013; Werbner & Modood 2015). Taylor (2015) discussed about the complexity and the multiplicity of individual identity based on one's interactional, situational, socio-historic and cultural contexts. Identity represents selfhood which is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people (Jenkins 2008). The selfhood of an individual is socially constructed through everyday social interactions and is shaped and moulded by society (Oyserman, Elmore & George 2012). The question of identity becomes complex when it is linked to migration. The process of migration is understood as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence (Lee 1966) due to various pull and push factors associated with the area of origin and destination. Migrants have to deal with challenges of retaining their shared values and norms (Brinkerhoff 2012) and in the process, acculturation imposes new values of the host society as culture is not a static entity, fixed in time and space, it is fluid and in motion (Bhabha 1994). Identity gets altered in the process while one constructs a new identity that reflects a fragmented identity leading to confusion about his or her identity where an individual has to choose between two or more actions. Negotiations have to be made to have a sense of balance in everyday life for social existence.

Tibetans are a group of people that fled their country mainly in the year 1959 and have faced prolonged displacement after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. Their refugee status is mainly based on a political status, which also covers the socio-cultural moorings, which has been supported by Norbu (2001) who argued that a lot of changes have unfurled among this group through education and new experiences in the face of dislocation and exile. So in the process of displacement and resettlement, the issues of cultural change and formation of identity emerge with the exposure to the host society. Consequently, various challenges are encountered and many negotiations are made with time and space.

In this light, the question arises about how the Indian born Tibetans perceive their situation in India, while being a part of a community living in exile for more than six decades? This paper attempts to understand this question by examining the Tibetans' sense of belongingness through the personal narratives of their experiences in their everyday life circumstances. The present paper locates

the Tibetans in India in terms of construction of identity and negotiations made in everyday life.

Further, this paper attempts to draw an understanding of the life of Indian born Tibetans from an ongoing study. The paper will begin with the brief historical backdrop of Tibetans in exile and the state policies on subjecthood, followed by the personal narrations of the respondents to see the kind of negotiations made if any in the process of identity construction. The primary information has been drawn from the narratives of young Tibetans about their personal experiences and the challenges that face them in their everyday life. However, the study requires deeper exploration in understanding the nuances of everyday experiences of Tibetan identity and negotiations both in discourse and practice.

I have used the phenomenological approach, which seeks to investigate and understand social phenomena as consciously experienced by humans. So the concept of self is understood to have an important relation to one's experiences. According to Edmund Husserl, humans know about the world only through experience and mental consciousness which is taken for granted and this shapes their identity and their actions (Turner 1978). Jenkins (2008) argued that everyday life is full of real encounters with small groups and manifests larger groups offering a sociological framework for answering the questions on identity and identification which involves social interactions. Therefore, it can be construed that identity is the outcome of continuous play of history, culture and power where certain groups and individuals exercise more influence over the process of representation of identity than others (Kennedy 2001).

Tibetans in exile

Tibetans fled Tibet after the Chinese occupation of the country in 1959. Since then, they have been living in exile in India and other countries for more than six decades with a large number of their descendants who have been born in the host countries. According to Tibet Justice Centre, the estimated number of Tibetans in India is 111,170 as per 2007 record.¹ However, the population of Tibetans in exile as per the Demographic Survey of Tibetans in Exile, 2009, and the Planning Commission of Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), 2010, is approximately 128,014 worldwide;

the country-wise distribution is put to 94,203 in India, 13,514 in Nepal, 1,298 in Bhutan and 18,999 in the rest of the world (Tibet.net).² Although Tibetans are spread over various continents of Asia, America, Europe and Australia they have the largest presence in India (Ahmad 2012).

The Tibetans have been living in different parts of India over all these decades as refugees, in a state of statelessness. Refugeehood of the Tibetans in India is complex matter as they face a paradoxical situation (McConnell 2013) of being “Tibetan citizens” for the Tibetan government in exile, “refugees” in the eyes of the international community and “foreign guests” in the eyes of the Indian state as India. India is not a party to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, and has no specific legislation about refugee rights and therefore under no obligation to recognize the Tibetans as refugees and honour their rights. Under the Foreigners Act of 1946 and the Registration of Foreigners Act of 1939, Tibetans are listed as “foreigners” in India (Moynihan 2012). The Indian Registration Certificate “RC” which is the official document provided to Tibetans is not a “Refugee Card” but it is taken as an identity card for Tibetans living in India. The Indian Citizenship Act (Amendment) of 1986 allows acquiring of Indian citizenship by anyone born in India between January 26, 1950, and July 1, 1987. Choedon (2018) highlights that the amendment (1986) has made a large section of the second and third generations of Tibetans eligible for Indian citizenship. Moynihan argues that after more than five decades in exile, the Tibetans need citizenship because without it the young Tibetans cannot claim rights like right to freedom of expression, or the right to apply for secure government jobs; being non-citizens they see all the years of hard work in schools go waste (Moynihan 2012). Tibetans hold seats as ‘foreign students’ in Indian universities (de Voe 1981) for higher education while paying higher fees (compared to Indian students). Today, the Tibetans in exile are stuck between the two polar ends of foreigners and refugees (Ahmad 2012).

Choedon (2018) mentioned that despite no formal restrictions imposed by the CTA on Tibetan refugees seeking Indian citizenship, they are being discouraged from taking the step because of the fear of social exclusion and the possible accusation of not being patriotic (Piotrkowska 2016). Notwithstanding all

these apprehensions many young Tibetans making efforts to take Indian citizenship for the practical reasons of livelihood and social existence. This trend has given rise to many difficulties within the community (Kumar 2018); one such problem being confusions among the youth over their sense of belonging and identity.

The Tibetan Government in Exile, also known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), takes care of the rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees and works for restoring the freedom of Tibet by prioritizing education in the rehabilitation agenda. The CTA has been trying to empower its members socio-economically with various reform initiatives, simultaneously keeping them intact by preserving and promoting traditional values and distinct socio-cultural, linguistic, religious heritage and their Tibetan identity. Tibetan citizenship and identity is materialised in the form of "green book" or the *rangzenlagteb* introduced by the Tibetan Government in exile in 1972 to mainly encourage the Tibetans to support their government and to show their loyalty. It also provides benefits to the green book holders and thus the *rangzenlagteb* or the green book acts as a marker of Tibetan identity (McConnel 2013). However, this document is valued only by the Tibetan government in exile and not recognised by any other State.

The Government of India followed the policy of creation of separate settlements for the Tibetan in India for preservation of their culture and identity, which has been appreciated globally. Choedon (2018), for example, has observed that the Tibetans living in India have been able to successfully reconstruct their social, political and religious institutions in exile with the kind support and assistance of the government of India. Saklani (1978) has pointed out that unlike many other displaced communities, the Tibetans exhibit a very firm pattern of preservation of their culture and identity. Substantiating this view Mountcastle (2008) has argued that the Tibetans are one of the most "successful" refugee groups of the 20th century while Anand (2010) regarded it as a model of diasporic community. However, despite all these accounts of "success" the Tibetans in India experience many difficulties and challenges involving their citizenship, identity, livelihoods and rights.

Identity construction and negotiation

Dealing with the identity question let us begin with the interesting lines written by Tenzin Tsundue (2006: 13), a young Indian born Tibetan activist,

I am more of an Indian
 Except for my chinky Tibetan face
 “Nepali?” “Naga?” “Manipuri?”
 But never the question- “Tibetan?”
 I am a Tibetan
 But I am not from Tibet
 Never been there
 Yet I dream of dying there.

The lines above express the tragedy of being a person of a lost country. The Indian-born Tibetans feel the need to keep the notion of homeland alive on one hand and, on the other hand, they struggle with different kinds of challenges in dealing with the host population in their everyday life as a result of being the heirs of the displaced.

The life processes of the young Tibetans are, to a great extent, reflective of the complex negotiations of home, identity and belonging in the everyday experiences of social life. Jenkins (2008) argues that the questions like who we are and who we are seen to be greatly matter for social existence as Tibetans in India continue to experience differential treatments (McConnell 2013) in the host society as well as within their own community. Considering the following personal narratives of Tibetans born in exile, few observations can be made about the Tibetan identity situation and problems in everyday life.

Tenzing was born and brought up in exile in India. He went to Central School for Tibetans (CST) in Darjeeling and later pursued his higher education from South India. His desires to take Indian citizenship for the practical concerns like livelihood and career but has not been successful so far due to lack of necessary documents. His application to the Tibetan Government in Exile for the green book, which would have helped him with scholarship for further studies and training, has also been rejected thrice; this leaves him in a state of confusion and dilemma. He said:

I am neither a Tibetan nor an Indian since I do not have any document to proof my identity. My admission in CST had been possible through the Tibetan document of my uncle who had adopted me. I finished school education with good grades which further helped me in getting admission in college for higher education. After completing graduation, I have been trying to get an identity document but failed to acquire one. This statelessness makes me feel very helpless and frustrated. Failing to get an Indian document is understandable but rejection from the Tibetan Government in Exile, despite my pleas is heart-breaking. Many other young Tibetans like me with no background to push the application process through are suffering. This non-recognition and privation of identity leaves us in a state of insecurity and helplessness.

Tenzing has chosen to negotiate and, at the same time, compromise with this everyday situation. Now his identity is only that of a health practitioner and he focuses on his private clinical visits for livelihood and sustenance. Choedon (2018) has argued that such statelessness disqualifies the young Tibetans from many jobs while living in exile.

Further, the Tibetan youths in India seeking admission in Indian universities have to apply as foreign students and pay higher fees for their studies. Tshering, a young Tibetan boy, narrates his experience as thus:

I got admission in an under graduate course in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) out seats reserved for foreign students and throughout my study period, I had to face the question which foreign country do I represent; I was utterly puzzled searching for an answer. I have only been in India and visited some parts of India but never been to any foreign country, yet I had to carry the "foreigner" identity. Back home in Sikkim, we are labelled as Tibetan refugees by the host communities and very often, while interacting with friends and family, I refuse to be called a refugee. I am an Indian by birth and a Tibetan by blood, So, I am an Indian Tibetan. At home, I am a Tibetan, in the community outside I am an Indian Tibetan and for the State and university I am a foreigner although I was born in India and have never been to any foreign country. So

my identity situation is very complex and confusing. In the university, I had to pay fees in US Dollars, which shook me terribly as it was very difficult for my family to arrange such high fees in US currency. I thought of dropping out many times, but with the support of my relatives and family members, I managed to complete the course.

He had to pacify his feelings of anxiety, confusions by self-negotiating the identity situation and make adjustment in his everyday life. This demonstrates the hurdles encountered by the young Indian born Tibetans in exile where the youth have to go through such conflict laden process of identification.

Tsetan, a young man, narrates his experiences and difficulties for being an heir of displaced community and how the idea of freedom gets constrained. During the first Covid 19 vaccination drive for elderly citizens in Sikkim, he ran from pillar to post to get his mother vaccinated for which Unique Identification Document (aadhar) number was mandatory to register for the vaccination process. He says:

Amla, my 70-year-old mother, did not have the aadhar card as she did not procure one basically to preserve her identity as Tibetan. However, during Covid pandemic, when the whole world was struggling, and living with the fear of death, I ran from pillar to post to arrange vaccination for my mother. Unable to produce any identification document I felt so helpless and frustrated.

This highlights the dilemma of Tibetans who, on the one hand, are keen to preserve their homeland (Tibetan) identity alive and, on the other hand, suffer and negotiate the challenges in their everyday life for being the heirs of the displaced and “non-citizens” (Basu 2018). The Tibetans of older generation want to keep their culture and identity alive while the members of the younger generation encounter challenges in their search for a decent life with a stable identity. While living in this dilemma, they discover themselves being no-body, the people without an identity, in a state of statelessness. The members of the younger generation Tibetans in India find themselves in a process of constant negotiation in their everyday life.

The urge for securing Indian citizenship among the younger generation of the Tibetans is not unequivocal. On the Indian

citizenship question also they are divided. Rehnamol (2017), in this context, has observed that those who are hesitant in applying for Indian citizenship are driven by the fear of losing their identity as Tibetans; they also fear at times that if they all turn Indian by citizenship their struggle for free Tibet will become weak. Thus, although they can apply for citizenship under CTA the Tibetans living in India hesitate in taking the step as it would dilute their freedom movement. The Tibetans living in western countries, however, take a different position on the point of citizenship. As Choedon (2018) has observed, the Tibetans living in western countries are encouraged to take up citizenship and label them as Tibetan ambassadors. This contradictory positions of the uprooted Tibetans create division within the community and this is something that needs to be pondered upon.

Conclusion

Identity for the uprooted Tibetans and their dependents who have been born in India is, at the same time, a philosophical and practical question as they live with some serious and probably unresolvable existential questions in their everyday life. The dream of a free homeland, Tibet, and the pragmatic real life questions put them in a perpetual dilemma as to whether to cling to their Tibetan identity and culture or to be Indianised availing the provisions of the Citizenship Acts. They have to negotiate between the homeland land position of the older generation and more pragmatic approach of the younger generation. This results sufferings at the psychological level and in the fields of education, employment, and culture. Being non-citizens instantly disenfranchise the Tibetans living in India as the Constitutional rights elude them. The problem is more complex than it appears at the surface level, as expressed in the narratives used in this paper. It is therefore important to look into more narratives of lived experiences of the ordinary Tibetans born in India in order to grasp the true nature of their identity crisis and negotiations in everyday life.

Notes

1. Tibet Justice Center is a non-governmental organization comprised of Tibetan and Western lawyers, law professors, and advocates who for over twenty-five years have used legal action and education to advocate for human rights and self-determination for the Tibetan people. TJC's ongoing mission includes legal scholarship and advocacy to improve conditions for Tibetans in Tibet and for Tibetans in exile and to assist Tibetans with immigration and asylum matters.
2. Tibet in Exile from <https://tibet.net> as retrieved on 10th November, 2018

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