

Lhakar: The Tibetan White Wednesday

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, waves of forced migration have surged during times of political oppression and armed conflict, pushing countless individuals to seek safety and a fresh start in new countries. India has long served as a haven for diverse refugee groups; Sri Lankan Tamils, Pakistanis, Rohingya and Bangladeshi Muslims, and Afghan refugees, among others. Given their significant presence in this economic, social and cultural landscape, this paper proposes to explore how the life of Tibetans have shaped their identity in exile. This paper also explored through the dimensions of how celebrating auspicious days preserve ethnic identity of an exilic community.

Design/methodology: The present study employed descriptive research to identify characteristics, trends and categories related to the identity of Tibetans. It studies the unique intersectionality of aspects like, ethnicities, nationalities and backgrounds combined with the numerous overlapping aspects of a Tibetan identity.

Key Words : Refugee, Ethnicity, Exile, Auspicious days, Lhakar, White Wednesday nationality, Rehabilitation, Political refugee

INTRODUCTION

Every “Wednesday” of the week, Tibetans-in-exile are reclaiming and embracing their Tibetan identity and making a political statement by wearing their traditional clothes, speaking Tibetan language, eating Tibetan food, reciting Tibetan prayers and buying from Tibetan-owned businesses. A demographic survey of Tibetans in Exile 2009, by Planning Commission of Central Tibetan Administration revealed that there are approximately 1,28,014 Tibetans living in Exile among whom 94,203 reside in India, 13,514 in Nepal, 1,298 in Bhutan and 18,999 in rest of the world (Table 1).

In 1914, a Peace Convention was signed by Britain, China and Tibet that formally recognized Tibet as an independent country. As a result of which representatives from the major monasteries governed Tibet with the Dalai Lama as the head of the government. They had a deep faith in religion. In 1949 China came to Tibet in order to “liberate and protect it”. This was when the Chinese rule started to spread in Tibet as a result of which Tibetans

began to leave their country in small numbers. Few years later in 1953 Chinese troops forcibly occupied Tibet killing, detaining and arresting thousands of Tibetan citizens despite pleas from the Dalai Lama and his government. The efforts of the Dalai Lama to find a peaceful solution to the ongoing violence proved futile and his personal security was threatened as a result of which in 1959 he had to flee from his country with thousands of Tibetans following him to seek refuge in India (Rathee, 2010).

Table 1: Population of Tibetans in India

Sr. No.	Organization	Tibetan Population in India
1.	Central Tibetan Administration (2007)	85,000
2.	World Tibet Network News (2007)	1,00,000
3.	UNHCR the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2013)	1,10,000
4.	CTA Planning Commission in 2009	94,203

(Source: Fieldwork, 2021)

The Tibetan refugees were granted asylum by the government of India on the principle of non-refoulement that means protection against compulsion to return to home country. The Indian government tried to settle the exiles in many Indian states. In some places the exile communities were agriculture based and in other places they earned their livelihood through small business ventures in handicrafts like carpet weaving. In 1960 the Dalai Lama and his nascent government-in-exile was relocated to McLeod Ganj, Dharamshala, a hill station in the state of Himachal Pradesh. The Dalai Lama established an extensive network of government departments of his own to meet the needs of India's growing Tibetan population.

The settlement process of the Tibetan community can be depicted through three waves (Kumar, 2018). The first wave began when the 14th Dalai Lama fled from Tibet in 1959, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) crushed an uprising of Tibetans against the Chinese communist establishment. Thereafter, the second wave was characterized by people leaving the country during 1980s and 1990s. In 1980 opening of Tibet to trade and tourism, a second Tibetan wave of exile took place due to rising political domination, about 25,000 Tibetans came to India induration of 10 years. A third wave of Tibetans comprises the arriving Tibetans from Tibet till date. Although, the total population of Tibetan refugees living in northern is almost same as in southern India, there are more Tibetan settlements and communities in northern India due to the weather conditions. Almost half of Tibetans in India live in the following five communities *i.e.* Ladakh, Dharamshala, Dekyiling, Doeguling and Lugsam. The population of these places is shown the Table 2.

Table 2: Population of various Tibetan settlements in India

Sr. No.	Place	Population
1.	Dharamshala	13, 701
2.	Doeguling	9,847
3.	Lugsam	9,229
4.	Ladakh	6,769
5.	Dekyiling	5,686

(Source: Tibetan Innovation Challenge, University of Rochester)

Tibetans in Dharamshala:

Dharamshala, a municipal corporation city in the upper reaches of the Kangra Valley, is the capital centre of the Tibetans-in-exile in India. On 29 April 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama established the Tibetan exile administration in the north Indian hill station of Mussoorie.

In May 1960, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) was moved to Dharamshala. In 1960 the government-in-exile was set up and since then, many monasteries have been established by Tibetan immigrants. In 1970, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives with over 80,000 manuscripts and other important resources related to Tibetan history, politics and culture was set up with a motive to preserve the Tibetan culture. McLeod Ganj is also known as 'Little Lhasa' or 'Dhasa', a combination of Dharamshala and Lhasa. The Tibetan Welfare office was established in 1967 and it acts like liaison between the Tibetans refugees in Dharamshala and Central Tibetan Administration. The present population of Tibetan refugees in Dharamshala is 10,470. Prevalence of the Dalai Lama, their religious leader made the Tibetans to continue with their own culture, identity, tradition, belief, language and preservation of culture and ethnicity was their main motto to flee from Tibet.

Tibetan Culture:

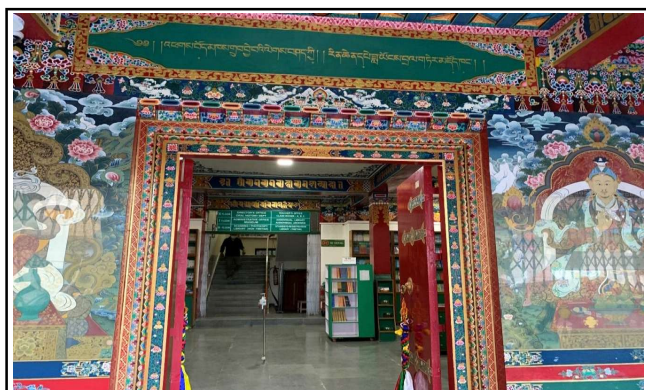
The remote geographical isolation imposed by the Himalayas allowed Tibetans to develop a unique culture separate from those of other peoples in central Asia. Tibetans have their own distinct language, art, architecture, cuisine, calendar, music, dances, literature and cultural traditions. First priority of every Tibetan, who settled in Tibet or in the rest of the world, was to preserve the traditional and unique identity of their culture. A lot of Tibetan culture is influenced by Tibetan's Buddhist beliefs. Music, literature and artwork of the community often feature their religious themes (Houston and Wright, 2003).

Dalai Lama founded the (LTWA) Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala in 1970 with the purpose to preserve Tibetan culture in India. The library houses more than 110,000 manuscripts, books and documents, as well as photographs, artifacts and works of art which represent the Tibetan culture.

The Tibet Museum, established in 1998 and inaugurated by the 14th Dalai Lama on 20 April 2000, has a collection of Tibetan artifacts and photographs showing Tibetans' struggle to preserve their way of life against oppressive forces. The museum is adjacent to the Dalai Lama temple (Tsuglag Khang). It is the official museum of the Central Tibetan Administration Department of Information and International Relations.

Tibetan Festivals:

There are so many numbers of festivals celebrated



(Photograph credit: Jasmeen Kaur)

Fig. 1 : Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala

by Tibetan community. The Tibetan new-year is celebrated as Losar festival by all Tibetan Buddhists. Losar is the Tibetan New Year Festival. Preparations for the festive event are manifested by special offerings to family shrine deities, painted doors with religious symbols and other jobs done to prepare for the event. Tibetans eat “Guthuk” i.e. Barley noodle soup with filling on New Year’s Eve with their families. The Monlam Prayer Festival follows it in the first month of the Tibetan calendar, falling between the fourth and the eleventh days of the first Tibetan month. It involves dancing and participating in sports events, as well as sharing picnics. The festival follows with processions of music and dancing, mask dances or chaam dances, Black hat dance are popular on this occasion. The Dalai Lama holds teaching discourses during this festival. They influenced the Wild Bull Dance, Deer Dance, Crane Dance, Yak Dance, Peacock Dance, Sorcerers’ Dance, Drum Dance and other kinds of folk dances that are also the main theme of Tibetan Opera. Tibet has various festivals that are commonly performed to worship the Buddha throughout the year.

Tibetan cuisine:

Tibetans are very fond of noodles, goat & yak mutton, dumplings, cheese, butter and they also like to prefer butter tea and different flavour of vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian soups. Tibetan snacks like thukpas, momos, tsampa and Tibetan butter Tea are very famous across the region (Paul, 2021).

Lhakar: The White Wednesday:

Tibetans are said to emphasize their cultural identity



(Photograph credit: Jasmeen Kaur)

Fig. 2 : Tibetan food (Butter tea and Tsampa)

through celebrating “Wednesdays” which they call “Lhakar”. Lhakar can be directly translated to “White Wednesday”, this day of the week bears great spiritual significance to Tibetans because it is the birth day of the current 14th Dalai Lama. Lhakar is also considered as the Tibetan cultural resurgence based on a nonviolence strategy, applied through social, cultural and economic activities. For Tibetans in the exile, Lhakar is a way to remember who they are, where they are from and to give support to Tibetans back home. Singing a patriotic song on foreign soil or celebrating a Gorshey night in exile around the world, these are the acts that create spaces for Tibetans in exile to redefine their identity as Tibetans. This movement first started in Tibet and appeared in exile in 2008 following the nationwide uprising against Chinese rule. Internet technology played a key role in the spread of Lhakar from inside Tibet to the exiled community. The Lhakar pledge and a video called ‘**I am Tibetan**’ circulated on micro-blogging sites and the movement has spawned a website and blog where young Tibetans across the diaspora record their Lhakar activities. The writer asked for a promise from his fellow Tibetans to follow these 8 practices in order to preserve their ethnic identity. Their pledge is as follows:

I am Tibetan, from today I will speak pure Tibetan in my family.

I am Tibetan, from today I will speak pure Tibetan whenever I meet a Tibetan.

I am Tibetan, from today I will remind myself every day that I am a Tibetan till I die.

I am Tibetan, from today I will wear only Tibetan traditional dress, chuba, every Wednesday.

I am Tibetan, from today I will speak only Tibetan every Wednesday.

I am Tibetan, from today I will learn Tibetan

language.

*I am Tibetan, from today I will stop eating meat and
only eat a vegetarian diet and gain more merit
every Wednesday.*

*I am Tibetan, from today I will only use Tibetan and
speak Tibetan when I call or send a message to Tibetan*



(Photograph credit: Jasmeen Kaur)

Fig. 3 : Lhakar in Dharamshala

Elements of Lhakar movement:

Lhakar is also considered as an alternative to earlier Tibetan activism which included self-immolations. The number of self-immolations amongst the Tibetans were on a rise, thus, there was a need of paradigm shift from past Tibetan activism. Lhakar within few years of its initiation was successful in doing so as it has produced a paradigm shift in the way Tibetans conceptualize activism. The new paradigm of Tibetan activism had three key elements: de-collectivization of activism, weaponization of culture and adoption of non-cooperation (Dorjee, 2013)

(i) De-collectivization of activism:

In their fight for human rights and independence, Tibetans have routinely used the most visible form of resistance such as streets demonstrations. In response to attempts by China to stamp out what they consider as general public disorder, Tibetans adopted a strategy of de-collectivization. They successfully showed their revolt against Chinese rule through personal actions such as wearing traditional clothes, eating Tibetan food, listening to Tibetan radio and teaching their native language at home. Many Tibetans began to use their individual space to assert a cultural identity that they consider to have been suppressed for decades. In a politically charged period, cultural rituals became political actions, because they gave Tibetan people a “non-Chinese” identity. Emphasizing individual acts of resistance rather than public acts of protest, Lhakar has decentralized the

Tibetan resistance. Through de-collectivization of activism, Lhakar wishes to sustain the Tibetan struggle by empowering the individual resistance against Chinese rule.

(ii) Weaponization of culture:

The Tibetans while growing up in exile learned that their culture was facing extinction in Tibet and assimilation in exile. They believed that Tibetan culture was like a fragile flower; beautiful to look at but incapable of defending itself. For the preservation of such a fragile and important culture something was needed to be done. Thus, disempowering usual perceptions of culture, Lhakar started to use art, literature, poetry and music as a tool to gain greater political rights. They are using aspects of traditional Tibetan culture, such as expressing their faith in the Dalai Lama, love of their homeland and desire for freedom. Songs with politically charged lyrics or music videos with images of the Dalai Lama became more widely circulated and known. This upsurge in the public consumption of Tibetan music and poetry has spawned a modern renaissance in art and literature across Tibet as well as in exile. It is through these activities, Tibetans are rediscovering how culture can save politics, instead of using politics to save culture. The Lhakar movement is encouraging the revival of public enthusiasm for studying Tibetan. In various parts of Tibet, elders and children take pledges to speak pure Tibetan, shedding Chinese terms from their vocabulary and indulging in more Tibetan activities.

(iii) Adoption of non-cooperation:

Non-cooperation refers to an undeclared and peaceful boycott inspired by Gandhi’s non-cooperation actions during the Indian struggle for independence. The Tibetans have used this method of non-cooperation towards Chinese businesses and institutions. For decades, the predominant tactic in Tibetan resistance has been street protest which is an effective and low-risk tactic in exile but the cost of street protests in Tibet is unsustainably high. The simplest act of protest carries a possibility of being shot at and a certainty of being jailed by the Chinese government. However, through Lhakar, Tibetans have come to appreciate the power of non-cooperation. Since 2008 many Tibetans have started eating only in Tibetan restaurants and buying only from Tibetan shops, prompting Chinese businesses to close down in several towns. This “undeclared boycott” of Chinese-owned

businesses has slowed down their business in Tibet.

Lhakar in Dharamshala:

Every “Wednesday” of the week, Tibetans-in-exile are reclaiming and embracing their Tibetan identity and making a political statement by wearing their traditional clothes, speaking Tibetan language, eating Tibetan food, reciting Tibetan prayers and buying from Tibetan-owned businesses. Lhakar keeps Tibetans in exile culturally rooted (Pasricha, 2014) and bridges the geographical and generational distance between Tibetans in China and Tibetans in exile. Thus, creating a pan-Tibetan unity and solidarity that had not existed prior to the 2008 riots and crackdowns. Lhakar goes beyond celebrating Wednesdays and reminds Tibetans who they are and where they are from. For Tibetans in the exile, Lhakar is a way to remember who they are, where they are from and to give support to Tibetans back home. Singing a patriotic song on foreign soil or celebrating a Gorshey night in exile around the world, these are the acts that create spaces for Tibetans in exile to redefine their identity as Tibetans. Lhakar in Mcleodganj has become a regular routine of Tibetans to gather at the parking ground near the Dalai Lama temple on Wednesday evenings. They come together to celebrate the day of His Holiness by singing, dancing and consuming Tibetan food. They serve Tibetan food and drinks at the parking ground. In Tibetan Gorshey, everyone gathers around in a circle and dance their hearts out on Tibetan beats.

Gorshey:

In Gorshey, everyone gathers around in a circle and dance their hearts out on Tibetan beats. Lhakar is Tibetan community’s daily routine in which they gather and celebrate together. Lhakar helps keep Tibetans in touch with their identity because it’s easy to forget that they are in a foreign land and helps them revisit their cultural identity. They wear their ethnic clothes and consume their ethnic food.

Gorshey is favorite among Tibetans, especially among the women who always seem to be the ones starting it. The circle dance only has one requirement, to join in the circle and dance, whether perfectly or imperfectly. Many Tibetan youths who grew up in the exile, struggle with preserving their Tibetan culture and Tibetan language. Growing up influenced by other cultures, they are always concerned that they are somehow letting the older generations down by not being

Tibetan enough. The Gorshey circle offers a temporary respite as an encompassing space that manages to connect all Tibetans despite their many differences and generational gaps and have them dance together and celebrate their ethnic identity.



(Photograph credit: Jasmeen Kaur)

Fig. 4 : Tibetan Gorshey in Mcleod Ganj

Conclusion:

Lhakar goes beyond celebrating Wednesdays and reminds Tibetans who they are and where they are from. For Tibetans in the exile, Lhakar is a way to remember who they are, where they are from and to give support to Tibetans back home. Singing a patriotic song on foreign soil or celebrating a Gorshey night in exile around the world, these are the acts that create spaces for Tibetans in exile to redefine their identity as Tibetans. Lhakar is also considered as an alternative to earlier Tibetan activism which included self-immolations. Lhakar is also considered as the Tibetan cultural resurgence based on a nonviolence strategy, applied through social, cultural and economic activities.

From the ritualization of Lhakar, to having a Tibetan name, Tibetans in exile demonstrate a strong sense of Tibetan cultural and political identity, constructed with the fragmented memories of Tibet that they pick up from their family and Tibetan communities around the world. By making Lhakar a weekly ritual, Tibetans-in-exile are reclaiming and embracing their Tibetan identity and making a political statement by wearing their traditional clothes, speaking Tibetan language, eating Tibetan food, reciting Tibetan prayers and buying from Tibetan-owned businesses.

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