

The Tibetans-in-Exile in India: A Sociological Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose : 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. However, the Tibetans stand out: they fled not just as individuals, but as an entire national community, guided by both their spiritual and political leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In 1959, Tibetans emigrated not merely as scattered individuals but as a cohesive national community. In doing so, they transplanted an entire cultural, religious, and national identity, striving to preserve it collectively in exile. Given their significant presence in this economic, social and cultural landscape, this paper proposes to explore how the life of Tibetans has shaped their identity in exile. This paper also explored through the dimensions of how broader issues such as rights, their institution of marriage and family, status of women has impacted their stay in India.

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, Gender roles, Nationality, Rehabilitation, Political refugee

INTRODUCTION

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. However, the Tibetans stand out: they fled not just as individuals, but as an entire national community, guided by both their spiritual and political leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In 1959, Tibetans emigrated not merely as scattered individuals but as a cohesive national community. In doing so, they transplanted an entire cultural, religious, and national identity, striving to preserve it collectively in exile. According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as:

“Someone who, due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of that fear.”

With the adoption of the 1967 Protocol, this definition was extended globally, removing its original time and geographic restrictions. Beyond who qualifies, the Convention outlines key protections: the right to non-refoulement (*i.e.*, not being expelled to a place of danger), access to courts, education, work, housing, and travel documentation. However, India has not ratified the Convention, which means these protections are not legally guaranteed in India; a gap that leaves refugees, including Tibetans, reliant on host policies and goodwill. Thus, the Tibetan community's exodus is emblematic of refugee identity as defined by international standards: a distinct

cultural polity fleeing persecution, united under shared leadership, seeking sanctuary together and in doing so, exemplifying both the strengths and limitations of refugee protection regimes today.

In 1914, a Peace Convention was signed by Britain, China and Tibet formally recognizing Tibet as an independent country. Representatives from the major monasteries governed the country with the Dalai Lama as the head of the government. In 1949, shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the People's Liberation Army entered eastern Tibet, later forcing the 17-Point Agreement upon Lhasa in 1951; effectively annexing Tibet. Following the Chinese reach into Lhasa that year, early refugees, mostly wealthy Tibetans carrying portable property, began arriving in Calcutta in small numbers. Between 1951 and 1959, only a trickle of Tibetans came, discreetly integrating into West Bengal's multicultural society unnoticed. The situation escalated in 1953 when Chinese troops tightened control over Tibet, carrying out mass arrests, detentions, and killings—suppressing dissent despite appeals from the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership. Then, on March 1, 1959, Chinese officials invited the Dalai Lama to a theatrical performance at a military headquarters outside Lhasa. Aware of the danger, he declined; later evidence showed that the invitation was a pretext for arresting him. In the aftermath, the Dalai Lama, sensing imminent threat, appealed to the international community and ultimately fled to India on March 17, 1959, followed by nearly 80,000 Tibetans escaping repression in the wake of the Lhasa uprising.

Once in India, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama first set up the Tibetan exile government in Mussoorie on April 29, 1959, before relocating it to Dharamsala by May 1960. The initial refugee wave received substantial support from Prime Minister Nehru, who marshaled land donations from states like Mysore (now Karnataka) to establish settlements such as Bylakuppe beginning in 1961. At present, estimates suggest between 85,000 to 100,000 Tibetans remain in India, with total global Tibetan exile numbers, which include those in Nepal, Bhutan, and Western countries, hovering around 140,000 to 150,000. India's Ministry of Home Affairs had earlier reported about 72,000 Tibetan refugees across Indian settlements.

Migration of Tibetans to India:

Tibetans arrived in India in three phases. The first wave of Tibetans arrived India in 1959 along with His

Holiness the Dalai Lama. Approximately 80,000 Tibetans followed Dalai Lama to India as they said they were lost without their Spiritual head and cannot live under the suppression of Chinese people. Tibetans who arrived in India in 1959 were accorded refugee status by the Indian government despite India not being a party to either the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. These Tibetans were issued registration certificates, which was their identity card and it must be renewed once or twice a year. The second wave of Tibetans came to India in 1980s. The second wave can be divided in two parts one was from 1980-1985 in which approximately 3100 Tibetans entered India from Bhutan as they were being forced by Bhutanese government to adopt the culture of Bhutan. Another wave of approximately 25,000 Tibetans entered India from 1986-1996 when the borders of Tibet were opened for trade and tourism. The third phase of displacement of Tibetans was started from 1996 and is continued till date.

Tibetan Diaspora:

The rehabilitation process of the Tibetan community in India was successful due to the possible efforts of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The process of settlement of Tibetan people in India started in the Bylakuppe Settlement following the approval of Karnataka state government. Today there are a total of 70 settlements in India where the Tibetans reside. Out of the 70 settlements, 37 settlements are agriculture based, one third are engaged in agro-industrial work and the rest work in handicraft business.

Social Division in Tibet:

The social division in Tibet was mainly into three classes on the basis of occupation of the Tibetans. They were The Nobles, the Landlords and the Peasants. The highest class was of The Nobles who were considered as the rich class. They were the owners of estate, farms and grazing grounds. The landlords and the peasantry form the middle class of Tibetan people. The shepherds are considered as a low caste as they serve both the Nobles and the landlords but they too are treated well. The main problem faced by landlords is scarcity of labor due to which the peasants were treated well and paid well by the Nobles and the Landlords. Trade was one of the main occupations in Tibet. Not only the class of professional traders but also the Nobles and Monks were

engaged in trade.

After coming to India as an exilic community, the lines of social division somehow vanished and equality prevailed in India. There isn't any division on the basis of class or caste in Tibetan community in exile in India.

Status of Women:

Women occupy essential position in the socio-economic life of Tibetan society but they occupy lower position in the religious activities. Tibetan women have emerged as the economic backbone of their communities, especially in India, where they lead in industries like handloom, carpet-weaving, and small-scale trade. Their participation in the workforce nearly equals that of men, around 47% of employed refugees are women. Agriculture and handicraft sectors, particularly carpet-making and sweater-selling, depend heavily on their skills and labor.

Within exile society, Tibetan women enjoy equal legal status to men. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) enforces affirmative-action policies, ensuring equal pay and benefits, such as full maternity leave, and supports women actively in government, education, and health sectors.

On the religious front, their presence has been historically limited. But in recent decades, significant progress has been recorded: women now access higher religious education. The Tibetan Nuns Project, for instance, supports nunneries that train women to achieve degrees like *Geshema*, equivalent to a monk's *Geshe*.

Education:

The education responsibility of Tibetan children is taken care by Central Tibetan Schools Administration (CTSA) with a seat in New Delhi. It is an autonomous organization established in 1961 with the objective to establish, manage and assist schools in India for the education of Tibetan children while preserving their culture and Tibetan ethnic identity.

CTA's Department of Education oversees 73 Tibetan schools in India and Nepal which provide education to approximately 24,000 Tibetan students. The Central Tibetan School Administration (CTSA) operates 28 schools in India for Tibetans, 6 of which are residential schools and 22 of which are day schools (CTA). In addition to these, there are 17 Tibetan schools for orphaned and destitute Tibetan children administered by the Tibetan's Children Village (TCV) and 12 schools in remote

locations from the mainstream Tibetan community that are administered by the Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society (CTA).

Institution of Marriage and Family:

The institution of marriage and family has undergone vast change among the Tibetan community in exile in India. The traditional Tibetan marriage system was quite open and followed three types of marriages such as monogamy, polygamy and polyandry. Polyandry type of marriage was preferred to keep the system of joint family strong. Today, the marriage system has vastly shifted from polygamy to monogamy as the Tibetans try to follow the norms and values of Indian society. The prevalence of late marriage among the Tibetan youth in India is quite evident as there is an increased emphasis on the educational and career pursuits.

The traditional system of joint families still exists in exile but due to the migration from Tibet to India many Tibetans are living alone considering The Dalai Lama as their family. The traditional joint family has also undergone change due to factors like modernization, education pursuit and career pursuits. With modern methods of family planning, the maximum number of children in most families is three.

Economic Condition:

Tibetans-in-exile were given separate settlements by Government of India to let them preserve their culture and their tradition and not to integrate them with Indian society. There are around 44 Tibetan settlements in India divided into three categories: agricultural settlements, handicraft-based communities and agro-industrial or scattered communities.

- ❖ **Agricultural Settlements:** Focus on farming, animal husbandry, and allied co-operatives to ensure food security and income.
- ❖ **Handicraft-Based Communities:** Thrive on traditional crafts like carpet weaving, textiles, and woodwork. Centers like the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre in Darjeeling (established 1959) play pivotal roles in training and economic empowerment.
- ❖ **Cluster/Scattered Settlements:** Smaller, integrated communities that mix agriculture and small-scale business activities.

Majority of the early refugees were farmers and nomads; they took agriculture as suitable occupation.

Because of their hard work and discipline, the first refugee's settlement at Bylakuppe (Mysore) became a role model for the establishment of other settlement in different states of India to earn their livelihood. Most of the Tibetans-in-exile are engaged in agriculture, handicrafts and selling handlooms.

Tibetan Administrative System in India:

With the permission and support of the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Tibetans were allowed to settle in India and establish a "government-in-exile" in Dharamsala known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). Earlier, the Dalai Lama served as both the spiritual and the political leader of the Tibetans but in 2011 the Dalai Lama proposed changes leading to the removal of his political authority and making the democratically elected Prime Minister the highest political office-holder of Tibetan government-in-exile.

Today the CTA operates according to the 1991 "Charter of the Tibetans In-Exile" and has three branches:

1. The **Executive branch**, headed by the Prime Minister, or "Sikyong" and supported by the Cabinet or "Kashag"
2. The **Legislative branch**, consisting of the democratically elected Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile
3. The **Judiciary branch**, whose members are appointed by the Parliament-in-Exile.

The ministers of the Kashag (cabinet) are known as "Kalons" and they head seven departments:

- ❖ Religion and Culture
- ❖ Home
- ❖ Finance
- ❖ Education
- ❖ Security
- ❖ Information and International Relations
- ❖ Health.

Rights of Tibetans-in-Exile in India:

The rights to Tibetan Refugees were mentioned in the Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy 2014. On 20 October 2014, the government of India issued the "Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy, 2014", which allows Tibetans to access the social benefit programs run by the government of India.

This policy allows Tibetans to access benefits under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Public Distribution System. It also indicates that the

policy requires state governments to sign lease agreements with the Central Tibetan Relief Committee for the land occupied by Tibetan refugees.

The policy allows Tibetans to access jobs in which they are professionally qualified, such as in the fields of nursing, teaching, chartered accountancy, medicine and engineering and allows Tibetans to get a trade license and permit (IANS, 2014). However, the representative of the CTA Department of Home explained that the implementation of the "Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy, 2014" depends on a decision by state governments to give the following incentives to Tibet people.

Some of the rights of Tibetans-in-exile are discussed as below:

Residency Rights:

The right to residency in India for Tibetans is based on the possession of a Registration Certificate (RC) which is similar to a refugee identity card. A Registration Certificate is needed for employment, to open a bank account, to obtain a driver's license and to obtain any travel document.

Special Entry Permit:

The Secretary of the BDL(Bureau of His Holiness the Dalai Lama) mentioned in one of their meet-n-greet that Tibetans coming to India from Tibet are required to have a Special Entry Permit (SEP) issued by the Indian Embassy in Nepal (BDL, 2014).

Rights to Employment, Education, Health Care and Other Services:

According to the TJC (Tibetan Justice Centre), Tibetans have high rates of unemployment and underemployment (TJC, 2011). Having a refugee status, Tibetans-in-exile are not allowed to start their own large-scale businesses (ANI, 2014; TJC, 2011) and aren't eligible for jobs with the government of India. The TJC report notes that Tibetans residing in India primarily work in the fields of agriculture, animal husbandry, manufacturing, handicraft business and in the service industry. The CTA (Central Tibetan Administration) provides health services to Tibetans as well as an education system for Tibetan children to Tibetans with an RC. According to the report of TJC, Tibetans without RCs face difficulties obtaining benefits or services including education and medical treatment.

Conclusion:

Following the 1959 uprising, approximately 80,000 Tibetans, including the Dalai/Lama, sought refuge in India. India has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, so Tibetans are treated as foreigners under the Foreigners Act. The Central Tibetan Administration's Department of Home oversees around 44 settlement offices across India, Nepal, and Bhutan. In India, there are 15 agricultural, 14 handicraft, and 11 scattered settlements. Tibetans primarily engage in agriculture and handicrafts, like carpet weaving, supported by cooperatives and special schools that balance modern education with cultural preservation. India has enabled the preservation of Tibetan identity through schools, monasteries, and institutions like the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre in Darjeeling and numerous nunneries and schools for nuns.

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