

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Sustaining National Identity in Exile: A Study of Tibetan Refugees in Goa

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Abstract:

This research paper discusses how the Tibetan refugees in Goa sustain their national identity in exile. National identity is defined as a collective sentiment upon the belief of belonging to the same nation and sharing of common culture, history, kinship, language, religion and it is distinct from other nation. Compared to other refugee communities in India, the Tibetan refugees are usually considered more successful in reconstructing their life in exile.

There are a variety of measures and unique strategies like homogeneous settlements and exclusive schooling, adopted by the Tibetan Government in exile for the dual purpose of rehabilitation and preservation of their culture in India. Gradually due to economic pressure, Tibetan refugees also began undergoing seasonal migration selling Tibetan handicrafts and woollen goods. This paper elucidates how homogenisation takes place in a heterogeneous society in order to sustain their national identity. This paper also attempts to explain that the priorities and perception of cultural identity also differs across the generations. By focusing specifically on livelihood strategies of the seasonal Tibetan migrants in Goa, this paper attempts to draw linkages between pursuing livelihood and sustaining national identity in exile.

1. Introduction

Population movements have been a constant feature of the evolution of human civilization. For a variety of reasons migration occurs within and beyond the geographical limits of states. In this paper, I have tried to confine my focus on issue of Tibetan refugees who are the result of political forced migration. This paper is based on available literatures and inputs from my field-study among seasonally migratory Tibetan refugees in Goa who are engaged into selling of jewellery and handicraft in coastal-tourist areas of Goa. I have tried to analyse the socio cultural dynamics and identity issues related to seasonal occupation of these refugees.

Unlike voluntary migrants, refugees have very little choice to make decision regarding path of their future in host country. It is the host nation's policy and perception about refugees which decides the fate of refugees. In case of early Tibetan refugees, sympathetic approach of government of India has helped them to re-establish their life in exile. Today Tibetan refugees are considered as one of the most successful refugee community in the world.

When people migrate from one culture to another, they carry most of their cultural knowledge, practices and expression with them. A refugee community in an alien cultural zone tries to readjust its socio-cultural aspect of life for adjustment in new realities of host areas. These adjustment involves a lot of changes in their socio-culture sphere as an attempt of negotiation between their past and present realities for their survival. In course of these adjustments, individual as well as group identity of the community members also get influenced and modified in new host area along with other socio-cultural changes.

Identity of an individual or of a group is a dynamic and ever changing phenomenon. In reality, the perceived individual and collective identity of a person or a group is based on numerous inter-webbed variables like religion, ethnicity, environment, nationality, politics, location, age and gender etc. Therefore, identity formation and its maintenance is a never changing continuous process.

According to social identity theory and self-categorization theory, individuals can develop two principal identities: a personal self, which encompasses unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves, and another one collective self, which encompasses information about the groups to which they belong (Tajfel: 1972). Now a days The Tibetan refugee community in exile is passing through the changing dynamics of individual and collective group identity.

2. Nation Building in Exile

In 1959, after a failed anti-Chinese uprising, the 14th Dalai Lama and thousands of his followers fled from Tibet to India and announced the formation of the Tibetan Government-in-exile. Gaining a free hand by the departure of the Dalai Lama in 1959, the Chinese intensified their attempts to transform Tibetan society according to the doctrines and techniques of socialism and every aspects of the traditional Tibetan society were intentionally fragmented and an economic class basis was artificially implemented in the society (Warren: 1986).

At present, even though the Tibetan refugees are able to express their grief and voices to the world in the international level at different platforms, increasing Chinese influence on International politics has negatively affected the international support to The Dalai Lama and his supporters in exile. The policy of government of India towards Tibetan refugees is also changing due to increasing closeness in Sino-Indian relationship.

Therefore, the immediate concern for The Dalai Lama and his government was to safeguard their traditions from extinction. Because it was subjected to strong disintegrating influences due to trauma of loss of independence. Therefore, rehabilitation of the refugees and preservation of their culture in exile was a mammoth challenging task for the CTA government and their spiritual and political leader His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

Traditionally Tibet was a theocratic hierarchical heterogeneous society. Therefore, the refugees who came to India were from different social- strata and provinces of Tibet. In exile it was necessary task for The Dalai Lama and his CTA government to give a homogenous identity to the entire Tibetan refugee community to prove their solidarity towards common cause of freedom of Tibet. In this regard, the approach of The Dalai Lama and his CTA government towards governance and rehabilitation has succeeded in their purpose to create a homogenous identity based on their broader territorial identity i.e. Tibetans for their entire community in exile.

It appears that one of the main advantage of territory based identity (Tibetan) is that it is directly linked to their main political issue i.e. separate political-cultural identity of Tibet from China and it has succeeded to attract the world attention on this issue. In India also, this identity puts them in advantageous position in compare to other refugees in India due to discretionary foreign policy of Government of India towards refugees from different countries. In compare of other refugee communities from different countries (like Bangladeshi, Myanmaris, Afgan etc.), Tibetan refugees win more sympathetic response from Government of India. Therefore, there territorial-identity has given them advantageous position compare to other refugees residing in India.

The first strategic effort for homogenisation of Tibetan refugees was made to establish a number of homogeneous Tibetan settlement based on agriculture and small scale industries across the country to minimise the impact of hosting Indian culture. While Tibetans were resettling in various settlements in different parts of India, separate schools for Tibetan students, monasteries were built for teaching of religious and cultural education along with modern education. The preservation of the unique Tibetan culture, religion, heritage and national identity through the rehabilitation of refugees assumed enormous importance resulting in the establishment of different cultural and educational institutions.

The objectives of having Tibetan cultural and educational institutions for Tibetan refugees in exile was to provide an education that would develop a deep understanding and appreciation of Tibetan culture, religion and language among Tibetan children and to ensure the preservation of Tibet's unique culture, religion and language in Exile.

However, in last 50 years, the hope for returning is diminishing due increasing influence of China in international arena. Now exile community is facing another challenge for livelihood with decreasing resources due to high birth rate in initial years in exile and continuous influx of new refugees from Tibet. As a result, a number of refugees are being forced to opt some alternative livelihood to supplement their income. The selling of clothes and handicrafts in various Indian cities during the lean season of agriculture is a widely adopted livelihood strategy in their population and now a day, it is a common phenomenon associated with their life in exile.

As a result of prolonged exposure and interaction with dominant Indian culture (due to increasing seasonal migration among Tibetan refugees), a number of culture traits of Indian culture (e.g., language, food, dress, agriculture etc.) are being continuously infused into the Tibetan culture resulting into gradual changes in their cultural identity.

In many studies it has been observed that the feeling of identity crisis intensifies when refugees come from countries that are ethnically/racially dissimilar from the host culture since their 'otherness' is more noticeable (Parker and Brassett: 2005). Connected to this is the feeling of fear that some refugees feel in their destination country based on their refugee status (Griffiths: 2001) although refugees experienced a sense of fear in their home countries, this is a new type of fear that accompanies their refugee status upon resettlement (Burnett: 2013,4-5).

Based on interview of my respondents, it appears that the feeling of identity crisis was severe at the time of arrival in India which decreased gradually with establishment of homogenous refugee settlements. The elder generations of the Tibetan refugees are losing the hope due to prolonged struggle without any significant result and neglecting attitude of the world community towards Tibetan issues due to increasing Chinese influence. Among the younger generations also, this issue is causing frustration due to non-fulfilment of their individual priorities e.g. livelihood and progress. The seasonal migratory pattern and changing priorities of Tibetan youth is elevating the identity issues.

Here it is remarkable that the pace of changes has increased due to changing pattern of their livelihood. In earlier stage of their exile, agriculture was major source of livelihood and interaction with host society was limited because interdependence between refugees and host society was very limited. But in due course of time, with changing pattern of their livelihood (seasonal migration), exposure and dependence (buyers of their products are mostly Indians) on host society has increased, resulted into accelerated cultural changes. Many of these changes like adaptation of Indian food, dresses, Bollywood music are taking place unconsciously. While some other changes like learning of Hindi and other Indian languages are being purposively adopted for survival and livelihood in present situation. With English as the language of instruction in the schools, and literate Hindi a necessity for daily life, role of Tibetans language in their daily life is shrinking.

Therefore, even though seasonal migration is providing livelihood for these refugees, it is gradually altering their cultural institutions which were supposed to be preserved in exile. This situation is creating dilemma and confusion across different generations of refugees on the issues of their priorities, livelihood and identity. We can say that gradually these refugees are integrating in host culture in some aspects (e.g. Language, dress) and their identity as refugees is mainly associated with territorial affiliation to origin place.

It is a common belief that rate of cultural assimilation is quite high among the new generation of any society compared to the earlier generation. Like any other society, inter-generational differences among Tibetan refugees is visible on the issue of priorities or perception of culture identity. The improved economic condition, increased literacy and exposure to western cultural traits have

changed the new generation's aspiration and priorities over the generations. Therefore, perception of Tibetan culture and identity is changing among new generations of Tibetan refugees.

The new generations of the Tibetan refugees are finding it difficult to follow traditional education system which is meant for community's cultural preservation. Because it is not sufficient to cater their requirements for livelihood and is conflicting with their personal ambitions. As a result, with the development of modern education, unemployment has become a growing problem for the younger generations resulting in the migration from the settlements.

All over Asia, religious ways of life are facing keen competition from the West. The Tibetan communities have not been entirely exempt. The changes in the core sphere of traditional Tibetan institutions (decreasing influence of religion on individuals) have also forced many changes in the ideological perceptions especially of the younger generation like secular religious belief as well as the changes in the pattern of marriage system. On the other hand, they have maintained their identity too, so that the rich culture and traditions will not be extinct from their life. All these changes indicate the change of traditional mind set into modern western ideology by adjusting to their circumstances.

3. Conclusion

The overall picture that emerges of the Tibetan community in exile is that in past fifty years' values and ideals have changed dramatically across the generations. Here it is remarkable that these cultural changes in the Tibetan Community in exile and its pace has created concern for CTA and old-guards about preservation of Tibetan Culture. Because one of the major motive for leaving Tibet was to preserve Tibetan Culture from forced extinction but here in exile, current circumstances are gradually enforcing changes in their traditional Tibetan culture.

This transformation in Tibetan exile community can be summarized with the principle of Functional antagonism. As Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) have summarized that when the salience one identity increases, the salience of other identities will tend to subside. Here with diminishing hope for return to the Tibet, they are becoming less aware of the norms and standards of their social collectives. Gradually individuals especially younger generations of these refugees are becoming more cognizant of their unique goals or qualities, which is amplifying their personal identity. At present, the Tibetan exile community's identity is passing through a transitional phase of negotiation between their traditional collective cultural values with individual priorities in exile and it is going to result into a newly transformed identity for younger generation of these refugees.

4. References

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