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Trial by Fire: The Transformations of Tibetan Buddhism since the Twentieth Century

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Abstract:

Popularly viewed by the outside world as 'Shangri La' or sacred land, Tibet has always been perceived as a traditional and deeply spiritual Buddhist society. After 1949, when the Communist Party of China (CCP) led by Mao Zedong took over power in China and began to "liberate" the Tibetan regions, Tibetan Buddhism was the first casualty. There was a reason for this ire of the CCP against the clergy. The sanctification of Tibet initiated by the thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1913, forged a connection between the landscape of Tibet, its culture, art and history, the Tibetan people, and their religious and political leader—the Dalai Lama. Hence the attack on, and suppression of the religion was seen as an assault on the core of Tibetianness. The religious persecution forced a large number of Tibetans to flee their motherland as refugees, starting with the XIVth Dalai Lama. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 saw a further increase in the number of refugees fleeing Tibet. When a symbiotic national community with specific political and geo-cultural boundaries gets dismantled, it leads to the collective construction of a sense of community among the members of the former national community. The Dalai Lama with the support of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) soon got on with the task of creating and sustaining the unification of the disparate Tibetan community. And Tibetan Buddhism became the best symbol of national unity of the community in exile. In this paper, I have attempted to depict how the keepers of the religion attempt a re-imagination and re-construction of their religion in exile. The paper concludes by portraying how Tibetan Buddhism, albeit with modifications, is undergoing a renaissance in exile.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetaness, Cultural Revolution, exile, religion

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt at documenting the changes taking place in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in exile since the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism has always been an integral component of the Tibetan state. If nation is an imagined community, then the Tibetan nation has been consolidated around religion, more specifically Tibetan Buddhism. What happens to the religion when it is torn from its roots? This paper seeks to account for this flight of Tibetan Buddhism from Tibet to India and the West. More generally, it attempts at documenting the transformations taking place in Tibetan Buddhism since the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The paper is divided into four sections: the first section traces the evolution of Buddhism in India and its spread and development in Tibet; the second section discusses the developments that occurred in Tibet in the twentieth century that led to the persecution of the religion; in the third section, I have attempted to depict how the keepers of the religion attempt are imagination and re construction of their religion in exile; the fourth section analyses the modifications that have occurred in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism after its transplantation to India and the West. The paper concludes with an introspective? note trying to predict whether the changes taking place in the religion will one day transform Tibetan Buddhism into another variant of Buddhism altogether

2. The Emergence and Spread of Buddhism to Tibet

While Buddhism has had a presence in China, Tibet, Japan and South East Asia, it had its origin in India. It was founded in the fifth century BCE in North East India by Prince Siddhartha of the Shakya clan. In the early centuries Buddhism attracted a large number of followers. With its emphasis on compassion, it provided a middle way approach to non-attachment and end of suffering. Unlike earlier Brahmanic Hinduism which used Sanskrit, the language of the upper priestly castes, Buddhism used the language of the common people, Pali. It was egalitarian, and after the initial restrictions, it did not discriminate between gender as well. All this drew a large number of people in its fold. However, after the seventh century its popularity in India declined due to a host of factors like laxity of monastic rules, internal differences as well as the renewed popularity of Hinduism as well as Islamic invasion. But though it faded in India, it grew in strength in other parts of Asia, where it often took on elements of the local religion and developed its own individual character. Hence we had Japanese Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism, all varieties of Buddhism, not similar to each other. The focus of this paper is Buddhism in Tibet

2.1. Buddhism in Tibet

Tibetan Buddhism is a form of Mahayana Buddhism called Vajrayana that entered Tibet and areas of East Asia following the sixth century. Prior to the arrival of Buddhism, the Tibetans practiced the Bon religion. Bon was an animistic religion that had traces of Shamanism and magic. Buddhism came to Tibet in 641 CE when the ruler, King Songtsen Gampo (d. ca. 650) took two Buddhist wives, Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal and Princess Wen Cheng of China. It soon became the State religion but in a few centuries was driven away and Bon was re-instated as the State religion. Buddhism re-entered Tibet and by the tenth century Tibetan Buddhism incorporated various components of the earlier Bon religion, and this ensured its peaceful incorporation in Tibetan society for centuries to follow.

3. The Threat to Religion in the Twentieth Century

As Goldstein (1999) wrote, “Tibetan Buddhism...exemplified for Tibetans the value and worth of their culture and way of life and the essence of their national identity. It is what they felt made their society unique and without equal. After 1949, when the Communist Party of China (CCP) led by Mao Zedong took over power in China and began to “liberate” the Tibetan regions, Tibetan Buddhism went through a number of phases ranging from the apparent tolerance in the first few years to the most cataclysmic periods of the so-called Democratic Reforms and the Cultural Revolution to a short but intense moment of revival in the 1980s to the increasingly repressive policies beginning in the 1990s and lasting to these days (Topgyal: 2012).

The status of Tibet has been a contentious issue since the twentieth century. While China claims that Tibet was a part of its territory since the thirteenth century, its current stand on the issue took shape only after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) came into being. To question the legitimacy of Tibet’s incorporation into PRC is to question the legitimacy of the idea of the Chinese State as constructed by the Chinese Communist Party; it is to raise questions against the cultural and political nationalism that has been fostered within the PRC and has fundamental bearing on the identity of modern China (Sperling 2004: 5). The Tibetan position on its relationship with China and on the Chinese invasion, keeps changing in an attempt to build a vision of Tibet that reflects the new sense of nationalism that grew out of the 1959 revolt and the years of exile that followed. Discussing Tibet’s status *vis- a-vis* China, and the intricacies of what Tibetans see as invasion, are beyond the scope of this presentation. For the purpose of this presentation it suffices to say that after China occupied/ liberated Tibet in 1949.

In 1949, Mao Tse- tung took over as the communist leader of China. In 1950, the People’s Republic Army of China (PRC), marched into and occupied Tibet. Their reason for doing so was to liberate the Tibetans from the domination of the landlords and the reunion of Tibet with mainland China. For nine years there were fruitless attempts at negotiations between the Governments of China and Tibet. In March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled to India. Following the Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans fled to India as refugees.

In the aftermath of this exodus, the Chinese establishment clamped down heavily in Tibet. Their immediate concern was to quell any further attempts at rebellion. Their main target was the monasteries. This was not so much due to the high proportion of monks who took part in the fighting (although a considerable number of them did, and, more important, the monasteries were in many places the repositories of large stocks of ammunition and food supplies which kept the rebels going) as an excuse for breaking once and for all the priestly hierarchy’s domination over Tibetan administration (Patterson 1961: 82). What followed was a total desecration of the monasteries, emptying it of all its treasures. The monks and nuns were subjugated to various forms of punishment and torture.

This ire of the PRC towards the religious sphere in Tibet was not simply incidental. Twentieth century Tibetan identity was largely religious identity. The sanctification of Tibet began in 1913, when the thirteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet put forth guidelines to strengthen his declaration that Tibet was independent from China. The guidelines had strong religious overtones. A connection was forged between the landscape of Tibet, its culture, art and history, the Tibetan people, and their religious and political leader—the Dalai Lama. In imagining the Tibetan nation, the national symbols were embedded in religion. Hence a suppression and attack on the religion was seen as an attack on the core of *Tibetanness*. Hence the religious persecution forced a large number of Tibetans flee their motherland as refugees. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 saw a further increase in the number of refugees fleeing Tibet.

4. The Cultural Revolution

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, also known as Cultural Revolution was a socio political movement that occurred in China from 1966 to 1976. Authored by Mao Zedong, its stated goal was to enforce communism in the country by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from Chinese society, and to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party. In a revolution in which students turned against their teachers, employees turned against their employers, thousands of Chinese were tortured, imprisoned, left landless and jobless and even killed.

When transported to Tibet, the Cultural Revolution worsened the already disturbed political, religious and socio economic environment in Tibet. Before the Chinese occupation, there were 6,000 Tibetan monasteries in Tibet. After the Cultural Revolution, there are six. Hundreds of thousands of monks, nuns and civilians were imprisoned or killed for wearing traditional hairstyles and clothing, engaging in traditional song or dance, or voicing their religious beliefs. Religious rituals were strictly prohibited. Anything representing the cultural and religious identity of the Tibetan people was eradicated. The Red guards of the Cultural Revolution which included some Tibetans, undertook a systematic destruction of Tibetan religion, language and culture and forceful imposition of Han culture on unwilling Tibetans in an attempt to Sinocise them. All education was taught in Chinese. Religion was declared to be poison and was effectively banned. Monasteries burnt down and sacred and ancient literary texts and ornaments were destroyed. The Cultural Revolution wanted to destroy the all evidences of Tibet’s unique past. Fearing the systematic attempts at erasing Tibetan national and

religious identities, a large number of Tibetans fled Tibet. Thus the ten years of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, saw a tremendous increase in the number of Tibetan refugees fleeing what they perceived to be cultural genocide in Tibet.

5. 'Non-Assimilative' Policy of Seeking Refuge

Of the millions that have fled their homeland seeking refuge and a new life in host societies, the Tibetans stand out. They have taken refuge not as individuals alone, but rather as a national polity that has escaped the destruction taking place in Tibet and have sought and been given the protective mantle of a neighbouring friendly country. Both a people and cultural institutions have taken refuge in a host setting and have demonstrated both strength and survivability (Michael 1985: 737).

In March 1959 the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet's political and spiritual Head, left the Tibetan capital Lhasa, after the Chinese suppression of an uprising and travelled for three weeks on horseback to the Tibetan-Indian border, where he was welcomed into India and granted refuge. In a meeting held between the Indian prime minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru and the Dalai Lama, few areas of concentration were identified: rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees, education of the Tibetan children, preservation of the Tibetan culture and identity, gathering and disseminating information regarding Tibetans both inside and outside Tibet, pursuing the Tibetan questions at the United Nations, and preserving and promoting unity among the Tibetan refugee community.

Over the course of the following years, tens of thousands of Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama – aristocrats and peasants, rich and poor, monks and lay people, and whole families from villages and towns around Tibet. Anticipating a long period in exile, the Dalai Lama decided to give priority to a more permanent rehabilitation, with facilities to enable all Tibetans to live in homogenous communities. With the help of the Indian Prime Minister, a number of settlements were established in different parts of India. As of today, there are a total of fifty-eight agricultural, handicraft-based or scattered settlements of Tibetan refugees in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Each settlement is administered by a settlement officer, who in turn is guided by the CTA, the Local Tibetan Assembly and the laws of the host country. These settlements are self-sufficient with schools, monasteries and livelihood avenues for the Tibetan refugees. The aim behind relocating the refugees into these exclusive settlements was a prevention of assimilation to the country of refuge and a preservation of their Tibetan identity and culture, so that not only the current generation, but also the succeeding generations would be prepared to take on the responsibility for the Tibetan struggle.

When a symbiotic national community with specific political and geo-cultural boundaries gets dismantled, it leads to the collective construction of a sense of community among the members of the former national community. The Dalai Lama with the support of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) soon got on with the task of the creation and sustenance of unified Tibetan community in the face of disparity with regard to the Tibetan populace. And Tibetan religion became the strongest glue that bound a beleaguered community in exile.

6. Buddhism Practiced in Modern Tibet

Religion informed every aspect of life in Tibet, right from politics to change of seasonal clothes. As Harrer says in *Seven Years in Tibet*:

The daily life of Tibetans is ordered by religious belief. Pious texts are constantly on their lips; prayer wheels turn without ceasing; prayer flags wave on the roofs of houses and the summits of mountain passes; the rain, the win, all the phenomena of nature, the lonely peaks of the snow-clad mountains bear witness to the universal presence of the gods whose anger is manifested by the hailstorm, and whose benevolence is displayed by the fruitfulness and fertility of the land. (Harrer, 1953 p 187)

Ever since the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1949, Tibetan Buddhists have been accusing the Chinese government of trying to control and manipulate religion. Religious persecution in Tibet is politically motivated, and consciously implemented as policy to realize political ends. While the Chinese communists claimed that they pursued a 'freedom to believe' policy in Tibet, given that Chinese mission of uniting Tibet with the motherland, this claim is inherently flawed. As already mentioned earlier in the paper, Tibetan Buddhism symbolized nationhood, and hence, denying the religion was one way of nullifying the Tibetan nation. Also, a country that regarded religion to be the opiate of the masses, naturally could not empathies and encourage the religious sentiments of the Tibetan populace. Though the worst attack and most serious attempt at annihilating religion was made during the Cultural Revolution, even after the Revolution, there was state control on religious practice. A communist state controlling religion is not the most conducive environment for the development of that religion. Tibetans claim, that the apparent toleration of Tibetan Buddhism by the Chinese authorities in Tibet is more to facilitate tourism, as a large number of Western tourists visit Tibet to see the monasteries, stupas and other holy sites that they associate with Shangrila. The Chinese attempt to quell Tibetan opposition to their rule by a patriotic re education, which largely consists of vilifying the Dalia Lama. His photographs are banned in Tibet, and anyone found in possession of one, can be imprisoned.

With the passage of time things have only gotten worse. In 2012, the Chinese Government has introduced a system that will place almost every monastery in Tibet under the direct rule of government officials who will be permanently stationed in each religious institution. This measure will surely exacerbate tensions in the region.

Given this apparently bleak context and prognosis, the only hope for Tibetan Buddhism lies in exile. With the Dalai Lama accusing China of not only political oppression but also cultural genocide, the onus of preservation of all aspects of Tibetan culture and religion, lie on Tibetans in exile

7. Tibetan Buddhism Practiced in Exile

In the opinion of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tibetan religion and consequently also religious rituals are helpful in keeping patriotism alive (1990:12). Given the intrinsic relationship between nationalism and religion, most of the national symbols of Tibet, including the National Anthem are related to Tibetan Buddhism.

7.1. Tibetan Buddhism Practiced in Settlements

A visitor to any Tibetan settlement is struck by the abandon of national symbols. And these national symbols are largely religious-colourful prayer flags flying from houses, gardens and monasteries, stupas in every camp, pictures of the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders. The religious practices and rituals are still an essential part of every Tibetan exile's life. The creation of a ceremonial calendar is a promising tool to evoke national sentiments among members of a nation because ceremonies and rituals decrease differences among people (Grodzins 1956: 61). The ceremonial calendar of the Tibetans in exiles begin with the commencement of the Tibetan New Year by the Government in exile in February or March. The various ritual dances and festivals, organised by the Government in exile witnesses' enthusiastic participation of exiled Tibetans. Their participation in such programmes and membership in various religious committees instils in them a sense of association.

Life in the settlement revolves around religion. It is common to see Tibetans say silent prayers on their prayer beads while they go about their daily business. Tibetans of all generations and gender devoutly observe the various tenets and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. The Holy month of *Saka Dawa* is strictly adhered to throughout the settlement. During this month, there are weakly prayers conducted by the various wards in the settlement. The people maintain a strictly vegetarian diet during this month. The CTA also organizes and sponsors various prayer meetings from time to time. Another influence of religion on the settlement is the absence of alcohol. Most settlements do not serve alcohol, even those that get a number tourists both Indian and foreign all year round.

7.2. Monasteries

An important dimension of Tibetan culture, especially Tibetan Buddhism is the monasteries. The Buddhist monastery has traditionally served as a primary locus for the generation and preservation of Tibetan culture, both material and intellectual. As mentioned earlier, the occupation of Tibet was followed by a large scale destruction of monasteries, the intensity of which increased manifold after the Cultural Revolution. In the last few years, China has been rebuilding these monasteries but mainly as a tourist attraction rather than encouraging religious tolerance. The monks and other religious who escaped Chinese religious oppression soon began the process of building their monasteries in exile. Most of the important monasteries of Tibet have been rebuilt in exile, though on a less grand scale. In fact, these monasteries are important tourist sites for Indians as well.

There are various adaptations that have to be made in exile with regard to the monasteries. The number of monks in the monasteries is much less compared to what it was in pre 1959 Tibet. Also in Tibet, the monasteries were secluded from the real world. In exile, due to lack of space and other constraints, the monasteries the monks live amidst the hustle and bustle of the secular, lay world. In such a situation, it is difficult for them to maintain the strict detachment from material pulls as it was in Tibet. Officially monks are allowed out of the monasteries once a week. But many sneak out more often. In Dharamshala, it is common to see monks sitting in internet centres, cyber cafes, talking on mobiles and zooming on motorbikes. There is also the additional lure of foreigners who constantly seeking monks in their search for spiritual clarity.

7.3. Tulkus

Another area of adaptation pertains to the notion of reincarnate lamas. There are over a thousand other monks and laymen who are revered as the incarnations of past teachers and are known as *rimpoches* or precious ones. By and large, the lineage of *rimpoches* survived intact for eight centuries, until the Chinese Red Army invaded Tibet, in 1950. But in exile, this tradition is fast unravelling. The irony is that while Tibetan Buddhism is gaining more adherents around the world, an increasing number of *rimpoches* are abandoning their monastic vows.

8. Tibetan Buddhism in the West

While Tibetan Buddhism is threatened in China, and has to guard itself against swamped by modernity in India, it is flourishing in the West. While Buddhism had featured in the Western religious discourse much earlier, it made rapid advances in Europe and America since 1970s when the Tibetan lamas came to the West after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The pioneer of Vajrayana Buddhism Guru Padmasambhava of Tibet, is believed to have prophesized in the eighth century AD in this famous quote: "When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth and the dharma will come to the land of the red-faced man." Though debatable, the red faced man in the quote is often said to refer to the Western person.

While the popularity of the religion has grown so much that Tibetan Buddhism is on its way to becoming a World religion, its practice in the West is not without its own share of problems. In the West, where the lamas are highly sought after by Westerners, the commercial aspect of supply and demand has entered the propagation and practice of the Dharma. Tibetans living in the West often complain that the Lamas cater mainly to a Western audience. Tibetans generally cannot afford the high fees of the lamas. In the West, Tibetan Buddhism is often stripped of most of its ritualistic elements and is one-sidedly regarded as a meditative technique aiming at spiritual or emotional growth, or merely understood as philosophical vision that opens new perspectives on negotiating the varied challenge of modernity.

9. Conclusion

Tibetan Buddhism has surely had its trial of fire in the twentieth century. From being a State religion of a secluded country, to having its very existence threatened by an atheist aggrandizer, to its escape into exile and its renewal, albeit in a different form, to its spread and popularity throughout the world- the religion has surely had a challenging trajectory in the course of these fifty years. There is no doubt that Tibetan Buddhism has survived its trial of fire.

The question remains, is whether it has emerged unscathed or whether in exile, it has lost its character to such an extent, that there is a danger to losing its identity. While there are a number of voices that lament the future of the purity of Tibetan Buddhism, at the same time there are or will be—almost inevitably—changes in the reception of Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet. For how long will it be meaningful to chant sutras in Eastern languages? How important is it to be well versed in the cultures that nurtured the specific Buddhist traditions? The Christian encounter with non-Western cultures led to processes of indigenization or contextualization of Christianity, with the result that one has African, Latin-American, or Asian forms of Christianity. In a similar way there are already, and will be, processes of contextualization of Buddhism that are non-Tibetan. Can Tibetan Buddhism thrive without its Tibetan context? It would be interesting to end this paper with the Dalai Lama's answer to this question. In response to a question on whether the essence of Tibetan Buddhism can flourish in exile, the Dalai Lama responded "For preservation of Tibetan Buddhism – Tibetan Buddhist culture – the main responsibility is on the shoulders of six million Tibetan people."

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