

# Narratives and Counter Narratives of Citizenship and Political Assimilation Among Tibetan Exiled Communities in India: An Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*Tibetan exiled communities in India have become a part and parcel of Indian socio- economic and cultural system over the years. The exiled life of Tibetans in India has been full of challenges and prospectus. Their demands for more opportunities and fear of cultural and political assimilation as an obstacle in their national struggle are essentially paradoxical in its nature and content. The issue of demand for citizenship right for Tibetans is a reflection of these mutual contradictions which attracted both appreciation and criticism among the Tibetans in India. In this context, the paper would analyse the narratives and counter narratives of citizenship rights of Tibetans and their political and cultural assimilation in India especially within the context of Tibetan Nationalist Movement. The paper would also analyse its major implications on their nationalist struggle for freedom from the Chinese occupation.*

**Key words:** Citizenship, Politics, Culture, Freedom Struggle, Tibet, India.

## Introduction

Tibetans' struggle for independence has been a much discussed and debated event in the arenas of international politics and foreign policy. In October 1950, China invaded the eastern province of Tibet and subsequently signed a 17-Point Agreement in 1951 for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet. This agreement which acknowledged the Tibetan recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and recognized Dalai Lama's right to administer Tibet remained as a failure when there was a huge Tibetan uprising in 1959 (Goldstein 1998: 84-85). Following this, there was a mass exodus of Tibetans to its neighboring countries including India in 1959. Tibetans under the leadership of Dalai Lama had established an exile government in 1960 in Dharamshala which is the main seat of Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). In the beginning, the living conditions of

Tibetans in India were miserable due to certain geographic, health and cultural factors. However, they got assimilated to the Indian environment keeping their nationalist struggle for freedom strong in their minds.

The Tibetans in India are not the ordinary refugees as they got the status of refugee not at an individual level unlike other cases rather they got it as a national polity. The Tibetans and their cultural institutions in exile have showed an extraordinary strength and survivability (Michael 1985: 737). In India, the Tibetans and their socio-economic, cultural and political structures have transformed and developed into a vibrant part of the modern world (Michael 1985: 738). The Central Tibetan Administration had ensured health and security of the Tibetan refugees and also their survival. The larger goals of CTA in India are the protection of

Tibetan culture and tradition, preservation of Tibetan's identity in exile and most importantly maintenance of a strong nationalist struggle to secure freedom from the Chinese invasion (Michael 1985: 741). The Tibetans have carved out the social and political spaces to assert their rights and to embolden their nationalist struggle in exile.

The Demographic Survey of Tibetans in Exile done by the Planning Commission in Central Tibetan Administration says that there are 94,023 Tibetans in India. Tibetans enjoy certain social, economic and cultural status in India. Tibetans in India are rich and lead a better standard of life in exile (Ganguly 2001: 9). Tibetans in India are given the registration cards which permit them to stay in India. For Tibetans, those registration cards need to be renewed and they require their identity cards to travel overseas. Tibetans are not allowed to own land in India. They also can't avail those job opportunities in India. The Tibetan government-in-exile issue green card to their person which is their proof of original nationality (The Indian Express, 2015).

It is said that in the present day Tibet, Chinese play a bigger role than what Tibetans do in their homeland. In this present context, Ganguly says that, the real Tibet could be seen in India (Ganguly 2001: 9). In regard to the legal status of Tibetans in India, Moynihan argues that the Tibetans in India, under the purview of Foreigners Act of 1946 and Registration of Foreigners Act of 1939, are recognized as foreigners not as refugees. In the landmark case of *NamgyalDolkar vs. Ministry of External Affairs*, it was ruled that "Every person who are born in India on or after 26 January 1950 and before 1 July 1987 are eligible to be the citizen of India" (Moynihan 2012).

Kumar argues that India does not have a proper refugee policy. India is not a party to either the Convention related to the stateless persons or a protocol relate to status of refugees. Tibetans in India exist as foreigners. When Tibetans arrive in India, they are given 'Residence Permits' by the local authorities. Tibetans get identity certificate from the Ministry of External Affairs on the recommendation of the Dalai Lama which could be used for travel purposes. Tibetans are required to have 'exit permit' and 're-entry permit' when they leave and come back to India. However, those documents cannot be used as refugee travel documents as India is not a party to the convention related to status of refugees. For example, Sweden rejected the identity certificate of Tibetans as valid travel documents. No country exercises any diplomatic protection over Tibetans due to their status of refugees (Kumar 2017). Kumar further argues that India need to rationalize its refugee policy. He further argues providing Indian nationality to Tibetans would be counterproductive as it would affect their nationalist struggle for independence and the foreign policy interests of India. India must establish a formal framework rather than creating ad hoc mechanisms (Kumar 2017).

Harrel Bond argues that Tibetans in exile are successful in countering the assimilative tendencies which is predominantly due to the influence of Dalai Lama's leadership and the international support from various individuals and other agencies (Harrel Bond 1986). The preservation of Tibetan religious, linguistic and artistic knowledge through the channels of education and documentation is one of the remarkable features of Tibetan exile government's policies (Nowak 1984). This is a culmination of the countering strategies

adopted by the CTA to prevent two legitimate threats; one is the disappearance of the Tibetan culture under the rule of China and second is the assimilation of Tibetans into their host countries (Basu 2012: 235). The policy of preservation of Tibetan culture has been adopted both at an individual and administration levels. This is reflected in Tibetan's use of their language, food habits, dress code and marriage ceremonies. The refugee homes are the great source of transmission of traditional knowledge and they do public performances with the aim of the preservation of their culture. It is believed that Tibetans are required to keep their memory alive in order to keep their possibility of returning to their homeland forever. Most of the studies on Tibetan exiles majorly highlight their pride in Tibetan ethnicity (Basu 2012: 235). The efforts for preserving the Tibetan culture are more intense among the most elder Tibetans in exile. The older generations, who escaped from Chinese occupation more than forty years ago, embrace the older ways of religious practices, dressing styles and other cultural manifestations like language, dance, music etc. (Diehl 2002).

Conway is of the opinion that Tibetans in India have been facing two mutual pressures which are contradictory in nature like all other refugees. On the one hand, they are required to keep their idea of return to their homelands alive and on the other side they are subjected to the pressures of assimilation and amalgamation with their host societies (Conway 1975: 75). Conway argues that the possibility of cultural assimilation of Tibetans would be less in India than any other place majorly due to India's multi-cultural and multi religious character Conway 1975: 75).

The status of exiled Tibetans in India is of mix of both positive and negative

outcomes. The paradoxical propositions between cultural assimilation and the determination for a strong nationalist struggle for freedom have taken a new turn in terms of the demands and rejection of citizenship rights of Tibetans. Very recently, Tibetan refugees were directed to register for voter identity card for Delhi Assembly elections which would later help them to get citizenship in India (The Indian Express 2015). There were mixed responses to it from the Tibetans in India. There are apprehensions among the senior Tibetans in CTA that if they acquire Indian Citizenship, then it will discourage those people within Tibet (Moynihan 2012). Many believe that acquiring citizenship in host countries would have huge implication on their nationalist struggle for freedom. If the Tibetans in exile assimilate politically and culturally into the host societies, then there would be no one to bother and carry forward the cause of freedom for Tibetans.

Moynihan is of the opinion that Tibetans in exile in India need citizenship. There are many examples where Tibetans acquired citizenship. The Tibetan minister Dolma Gyari is an Indian now. Many other CTA officials have acquired Indian citizenship. CTA official position states that if any Tibetans wish to apply for Indian Citizenship, they can acquire no objection certificate from CTA and it will not withhold its assent for the same. However, there are diverging views on it among the Tibetans in CTA and various Tibetan settlements in India. Many of them are of the opinion that Tibetans should remain as only refugees and they should not give up their identity and loyalties as Tibetans. Moynihan argues that this argument of preservation of identity and culture was irrelevant in early years of exile and now it seems less valid (Moynihan 2012).

## Conclusion

The demand for citizenship rights for Tibetans gained much criticism among the Tibetan exiled communities. The criticisms majorly came in the context of Tibetan identity and the need to save their nationalist struggle from further dilution. Their argument comes out of the fear of losing their identity as Tibetans which would destroy the entire discourse of Tibetan Nationalist struggle. The paranoid of cultural and political assimilation existing in some Tibetans is the culmination of their desire to return to their homeland. The counter narratives to this lies in the argument of deplorable condition of some Tibetan exiled communities and the incessant help and support from those Tibetans who have been assimilated to the cultures of the western host societies. However, it is essential to keep one factor into consideration which is that the success and failure of a nationalist struggle not solely depend upon the citizenship rights and cultural and political assimilation to the host countries. Rather the success of a nationalist struggle depends on the unbreakable solidarity among people and the combination of national and international lobbying under a great leadership.

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