

The Tibetan Diaspora in India and their Quest for the Autonomy of Tibet

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About the Paper

The Tibetan people have faced alienation for many years, which has forced large numbers of them into exile. However, while their plight is not an unfamiliar one, what makes the Tibetan people unique is their employment of non-violent means to bring about a resolution to their struggle. This paper attempts specifically to understand the Tibetan Diaspora in India, delving into the historical elements, the nature of their religion and culture, and the policies adopted by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The success of the middle way approach adopted by the Tibetans as a mode of reconciliation and conflict resolution is also explored in the paper.

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This paper was written during the course of an internship at CLAWS.

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Introduction

Tibet, known variously as “Shangri-La” or “Paradise on Earth”, had a legacy of independence dating back 2,000 years, with the exception of the 13th and 18th centuries. The people formed a unique culture of their own, on the basis of the religious teachings of the Buddha. Also known as the “Roof of the World”, Tibet is a vast plateau between India and China, 13,000 feet above sea level, with 2.5 million sq km of area, surrounded by the Himalayan, Kuntun and Karakoram ranges. It consists of three provinces: U-Tsang (Central Tibet), Amdo (Northeast Tibet) and Kham (Southeast Tibet). The people of Tibet maintain that Tibet has historically been an independent country. This assertion is made on the basis of the many discernible differences between the Han Chinese and the Tibetans. The distinctions are on the basis of language and race. The language of the native Tibetans has its roots in the Brahmi and Sanskrit script, which is phonetic and written from left to right. The Chinese language, on the other hand, has an ideographic script, written from top to bottom. The Tibetan race has its origin in the race of the Mongols and the people are from the Mongoloid stock. One of the Dalai Lamas was born in Mongolia and one in India, but never has a Dalai Lama been born in mainland China.

The genesis of the problem dates back to the ancient histories of China and Tibet, and both sides hold conflicting arguments. China claims that the marriage between King Srongtsen Gampo and Princess Weng Ching of the Tang Dynasty in 641 AD marked the union of Tibet and Han Chinese nationalities.¹ The Tibetan side disputes this argument, pointing out that Princess Ching was the second wife, junior to the first (Nepali) wife, Princess Brikuti. The Chinese also claim their right to “ownership” of Tibet by going back several centuries to the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th century, as also the

Qing (Manchu) Dynasty. The Yuan Dynasty was not a part of the Chinese Empire — it was part of the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan, who had conquered lands from Korea to Eastern Europe. As a result, Tibet was never ruled as a part of China; rather, it was given special treatment because Tibet's Sakya Lamas were the religious leaders of the Mongol emperors.² After the decline of the Yuan Empire, Tibet had taken charge of its own affairs as an independent country. Later, during the rule of the Qing Dynasty from the 16th to the early 20th century, Tibet was a Manchu protectorate, much like (erstwhile) Burma was for the British Empire. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, China professed a claim to Tibet, a claim which is questionable at best, in the light of the fact that Tibet had been a protectorate and not a province of Qing China. While Tibet had been a Manchu protectorate, it had never been a Han protectorate.



Tibet (Historical and Contemporary Boundaries)

Source: <http://www.friends-of-tibet.org.nz/tibet.html>

Therefore, the historical claims made by China are arbitrary and fail to prove its right to 'liberate' Tibet. It can be seen as a case of colonialism, wherein a stronger country takes over a weaker country under the garb of 'liberating' or 'civilising' it, exploits its resources for its own economic benefits and seeks to completely destroy its religion and culture.

The Tibetan people argue that “at the time of invasion by China in 1949, Tibet was an independent state in fact and law.”³ The military invasion constituted an act of aggression on a sovereign state and a violation of international law. In 1951, China sent a delegation from Beijing with the “Seventeen Point Agreement,” and the Tibetan delegates, under extreme duress, signed the “Agreement of the Central People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet.”⁴ This agreement was signed by the delegates solely in their own personal capacities, and Tibetans claim that it was, in no way, binding on the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan government. When the Chinese government announced the ‘Peaceful Liberation of Tibet’, the agreement assured that Tibet would not be subjected to any kind of enforced Communism and the Dalai Lama would retain his position as head of the state. The agreement was also meant to ensure religious and cultural autonomy to Tibet. But by 1959, China had violated all the points given in the ‘Agreement’. Organised oppressive methods were used against religious and secular institutions. The atrocities inflicted on the Tibetan population seemed to only increase with time, leading finally to the Tibetan nationalist uprising, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 90,000 Tibetans. The situation resulted in the Dalai Lama having to flee his homeland, with thousands of Tibetans following him, to seek refuge in India.

Since the beginning, India’s stance on the Tibet issue has been that of sympathy and support. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, without mincing any words, told the Dalai Lama, “The whole world cannot bring freedom to Tibet unless the whole fabric of the Chinese state is destroyed. The U.S.A., U.K., and others or anybody else cannot do this at present. The Dalai Lama should realise that in the present context, Tibet’s independence would mean the complete break-up of the Chinese state and it is not possible to envisage it as likely to happen.”⁵ He advised the Dalai Lama to choose his options very carefully. In his opinion, a recourse to arms was not the best possible option since China was a much bigger force to reckon with. India could also not afford to further spoil its already shaky relations with China. The best course of action for the Tibetans would be to initiate a peaceful dialogue, “standing up to the Chinese in frank talks in a direct manner.”⁶ This is the course which the Dalai Lama has followed till date.

The persecution did not end there for the Tibetans in Tibet. Greater suffering was yet in store for them. The Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, also known as the Great Leap Forward, led by Mao Tse-tung, proved to be the turning point in the history of Tibet. It was a mass movement backed by the ideology of “smashing the Four Olds: old ideas, old cultures, old customs and old habits” that swept through all of China, into Tibet.⁷ The Cultural Revolution was disastrous for the minority cultures and the Tibetan culture suffered terribly under its weight. The core theme of this period was the centrality of the Han ethnic group. During this period, approximately 6,000 monasteries were destroyed, and many Buddhist scriptures were burned or destroyed. Monks and nuns were tortured and thrown into concentration camps. Overall, 1.2 million Tibetans had been killed since the invasion.⁸ The Chinese, however, claim that the figures given by the Tibetan government-in-exile are exaggerated and that the main motive of the revolution was a class struggle, not ethnic cleansing. In fact, they believe that many Tibetans were active participants in the revolution.

The Tibetans have historically viewed this unprovoked act of invasion and aggression as an act of deliberate degradation, suppression of a native culture, and elevation of the Chinese culture and ideological values. The Chinese domination is maintained through military force, as also through manipulative means like economic and administrative power in the hands of the ‘coloniser’. The indiscriminate use of Tibet’s natural resources could lead to disastrous results; for instance, the plan to redirect the Tsang-po river towards China could prove to have catastrophic consequences for India, Tibet and the global climate as well. The Chinese have also been trying to annihilate the Tibetan culture through what the Dalai Lama calls “demographic aggression”, by pouring in ethnic Chinese population into Tibet, so much so that the Tibetans have become a minority in their own land. They dub it as the Chinese attempt “to wipe out Tibetan culture through the force of numbers.”⁹

The Central Tibetan Administration

When thousands of Tibetans escaped to India, either out of loyalty to the Dalai Lama or out of the fear of persecution at the hands of Chinese forces, for the most part, they followed the old trade routes through Bhutan and Nepal. These routes were later brought under the control of

Chinese border guards to stop the Tibetans from escaping into India. If caught, the Tibetans were either sent back home or sent to prison. Due to these developments, they started going through paths which were wrought with difficulties. These paths traversed snow-covered, 6,000-metre long mountain passes, where the Tibetans could travel only at night. The extremely dangerous and exhausting expeditions took two to three weeks through the treacherous Himalayan ranges. Because of the harsh climatic conditions and difficult terrain, many people could not survive. The main refugee population, i.e. almost 70 percent came from the central and southern regions and only 5 percent managed to come from the northeastern region. It was nearly impossible for the Tibetans to march from the northeastern region because of its location in east Tibet, which is the farthest from India and Nepal.

The Government of India was highly supportive and helped them in resettling into various parts of India. In the early 1950s, only the aristocrats of Tibet came to settle in places like Kalimpong, Sikkim, West Bengal and Darjeeling. The poor Tibetans were settled in makeshift tents in temporary transit camps which were grossly overcrowded. The camp in Assam, for instance, was planned for a maximum of 9,000 Tibetans, but by June 1959, three months after the Dalai Lama reached India, 15,000 people were squeezing into small bamboo huts and tents.¹⁰ However, this was not the only hurdle in the way; they had to cope with the drastic change in climate as well. The extreme climate in India was not suitable for the exiles, causing many diseases among them, and leading to many deaths. The Indian government sought to resettle the exiles in many Indian states, and it is interesting to note that the settlements were made according to the economic and social status of the exiles. According to Tom Grunfeld,

While all classes of Tibetans fled Tibet, it appears – if these studies are accurate – that the poorer classes are being relegated to the hotter, more economically depressed, more crowded, agricultural settlements where education and employment opportunities are far below those in northern refugee centers such as Darjeeling, Kalimpong, New Delhi, Dehra Dun, Dharamsala, etc.¹¹



The exiled communities, in some parts, were mainly agro-based, while in other settlements, they earned their livelihood through small business ventures in Tibetan handicrafts like carpet weaving. This industry today is thriving and Tibetan markets, which are found in almost all hill stations, are a major tourist attraction. Tourists come from all over the world to buy Tibetan handicrafts.

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) located in Dharamsala is a government-in-exile, headed by Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, and it lays claim to be the rightful and legitimate government of Tibet. The CTA is not officially recognised as the 'government-in-exile' by any country, but it still receives huge financial support from various governments and international organisations across the world. The CTA's structure is that of a constitutionally democratic state, with an elected Parliament and Prime Minister. The politics of the CTA are linked to the religion they follow. In

Tibetan society, religion is the fundamental driving force. The Dalai Lama is regarded as the divine leader, a tradition which has been followed for centuries and still stands strong in the Tibetan community. This can also be seen as a limitation in the structure of the CTA, which, despite its democratic framework, has the Dalai Lama as its undisputed leader – following the conception of the incarnation of God. To overcome this limitation, the Dalai Lama has offered to give up his position many times and made a clause which allows for his impeachment by the people, if they so desire. The people see him as the undisputed leader of the Tibetans-in-exile. Most Tibetans recognise the CTA as the only legitimate Tibetan government as it is headed by the Dalai Lama. As Lhasang Tsering, a Tibetan writer and activist, puts it, “At this point, he is our greatest strength and our greatest weakness.”¹² The Tibetans greatly depend upon him as a leader. The structure of the CTA, thus, seeks to break away from the largely feudal and oppressive institution of the government in Tibet, predating the Chinese occupation.

The CTA officially came into being on 29 April 1959, in the interest of the thousands of Tibetan refugees who had fled occupied Tibet. Their primary goal was to rehabilitate and resettle the exiles. The secondary focus of the CTA was the education of the resettled. From the beginning, the administration knew that their stay in exile could extend for a long time and they needed to equip the people to sustain themselves in the host country. In a speech in 1959, the Dalai Lama stated, “We will have to remain in exile for a longer period than expected. We will have to settle mentally as well as physically.”¹³

The CTA is not officially recognised as the Government of Tibet-in-exile, yet it is seen as the sole representative of the Tibetan community in exile. When the CTA came into being, around 45 lay and 80 monk officials of the Lhasa administration formed the base of the organisation. They were mainly aristocrats and monks, as also the only ones who had received education and were qualified to handle the affairs of the government. The traditional ranking was initially favoured by the exiled masses. The step towards a fuller democracy was taken slowly by the government-in-exile. It has, from its inception, acted as the interface between the international community and the exiled population. The CTA’s structure is characterised by a combination of the principles of Buddhism and the political concepts of the West. Some of

the democratic measures that were incorporated later were not welcomed by many within the structure, leading to the resignation of numerous high officials, and paving the way for others to take their place. This change was slow and was welcomed by the exiled Tibetan community at large, which was now living in a democratic society, where a person does not necessarily have to be an aristocrat to receive an education or to hold an important position. The CTA has been successful in garnering a huge amount of international support and aid for the struggle. It also works towards creating unity among the exiled Tibetans by promoting Tibetan culture religion and working on the image of a non-violent, co-friendly and religious Tibetan nation. By using traditional symbolism, it invokes the Tibetan identity and arouses a sense of national loyalty in its people.

Policies of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)

The Central Tibetan Administration needs the support and active membership of the exiles to function and survive. Since it has no control over any specific geographical territory or people, it mobilises national loyalty and international support through an efficient communication network and by providing various incentives for the people to remain loyal to the cause. The incentives are used to motivate the present and potential members of the exiled Tibetan population. Incentives to material resources, education and scholarship programmes are awarded by the government-in-exile. Another kind of investment utilised is the symbolic one, using religious symbols to evoke the Tibetan culture and to keep the issue alive in the hearts of the people. The CTA also takes care of the needs of the refugees. Since the exiles carry the identity of refugees, they cannot avail of many of the benefits that a country's citizens can. The CTA has to continuously come up with new incentives and solutions to discourage the refugees from taking the host country's citizenship. Most exiles avoid taking citizenship of the host country as they lose their credibility among the other exiles and it is also seen as a "national betrayal". The CTA creates many legal hurdles for those who still want to go ahead with it. One particular instrument used to discourage this move is called the "green book", which for Tibetans means the "freedom booklet". It is the Tibetan citizenship granted to the exiles and also functions at strengthening the hold of the government in community decision-making.

The Tibetan exiles who hold the green book are asked to contribute a fixed sum for the Tibetan cause. Those who are regular with the payments enjoy voting rights and jobs in the CTA. Such incentives help maintain the CTA's hold on the affairs of the exiles effectively. Like the green book is required for individuals to enjoy certain privileges such as scholarships and travel, the government-in-exile has also brought out a 'brown book' for organisations and institutions working for the exiled Tibetan population. The only prerequisite is that they should contribute 2 percent of their net project funds to the CTA. This provides the institutions with native credibility. The third kind of booklet is for the non-Tibetans and is called the "blue book". The holders of these are not entitled to any material benefits but are officially accepted as part of the Tibetan struggle. These policies have not only given the Tibetans an official standing in the world but also helped them sustain themselves over the years.

The CTA has always stressed the importance of education. Through education, they seek to keep alive the Tibetan culture and religion and their own distinct identity. It is a medium through which they gain self-empowerment and a tool which will help them in their political struggle to regain their homeland by creating loyalty among the people, enabling them to better understand the situation they are in and how to cope with it. In a way, it also assists them to sustain themselves in an alien society. The aim of the education system is to educate the children in traditional Tibetan subjects as well as in modern subjects. It secures loyalty through scholarship and sponsorship programmes. These opportunities attract the Tibetans living in the Chinese border regions, who are encouraged to go back to the homeland and spread the message of survival after finishing their education. This education forges a link between the exiles and the Tibetans living in occupied Tibet. Investment in education is one of the key policies of the CTA.

The Tibetan culture rests on the tradition of faith, tolerance and non-violence. These qualities are embodied in the Dalai Lama, who has worked actively through the years to bring his people together and engage in a non-violent struggle for the autonomy of Tibet. The Dalai Lama is seen as "Chos Rgyal", in the dual role of political leader and the earthly manifestation of Tibet's protector deity, the Buddha, of whom the Dalai Lama is the human incarnation and who is also seen as the progenitor of the Tibetan people.¹⁴ The

Dalai Lama enjoys the loyalty of the Tibetans, regardless of their social status or geographical heritage. He is revered and trusted by all and almost never criticised by any Tibetan. He acts as the unifying force for the thousands of Tibetans scattered around the world. He has also become a global celebrity since he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, and is seen as the living embodiment of the non-violent struggle of a nation to gain independence.

The national loyalty that he receives depends upon the institution of the Dalai Lama, which started in the 16th century, when the Buddhist scholar Sonam Gyatso successfully converted the Mongols to Buddhism. The word 'Dalai' means ocean and 'Lama' means teacher. Sonam Gyatso was named the third Dalai Lama. This motif is taken from the concept of reincarnation, which emerged from the ancient 'tulku' concept. While most human beings have to go through the cycle of birth and death, 'tulkus' can manifest themselves in human form by choice. This choice makes them unique, giving them power, authority and the devotion of the people. The fifth Dalai Lama was awarded the governance of Tibet by the Mongol emperor Gushi Khan, giving birth to the union of politics and religion.

Did the Dalai Lama prove to be a good leader? How important is he to the cause? Can the struggle sustain itself after his demise and will anyone ever be able to replace him as a leader? These questions are important for the future of the struggle and need to be answered. The Dalai Lama has been struggling to find a middle way to come to a resolution with the Chinese authorities and, despite the resistance, he has stood his ground to uphold the peaceful approach in every circumstance. His leadership qualities can be seen in the decisions he has made through the years of struggle. After coming into exile, he ensured that the Tibetan refugee community as a whole remains intact. He encouraged schools for Tibetan students, with a mix of modern education and traditional Tibetan studies. He did not discourage the exiles from immigrating to Western countries. In fact, he encouraged them, insisting that it was an opportunity that they should take, which would later also benefit the cause. He also urged the exiles to become economically independent, and not remain dependent on international aid. These decisions have stood them in good stead through many years of struggle. The economic self-sufficiency, however, runs the risk, as John S Conway mentioned, "of them becoming too comfortable in their exile that their willingness to go

back to their homeland with uncertain prospects stands diminished.”¹⁵

The Dalai Lama is intrinsic to the survival of the CTA within the community. Even he is aware that the Chinese are waiting for his death. The Dalai Lama is the strength behind the cause and has garnered much national and international support. He has also been the force behind the unity of the Tibetans. Without him, the institutions will suffer and face problems in terms of keeping the situation stable. To prevent a total collapse of the exiled Tibetan community, the Dalai Lama has tried to deal with the question of succession. First, he has made it clear that the next Dalai Lama will not be found within Chinese borders. The Charter of the Tibetans-in-exile of 1991 provides a solution in Articles 31-35, where the traditional concept of regency is discussed. Three regents, who will serve for a three-year term, will be elected by the exiled Tibetan Assembly and Cabinet and a chief regent will hold ultimate executive power. Another option could be the present 17th Karmapa, a high-ranking ‘tulku’ who had fled the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2000 at the age of fourteen. The 17th Karmapa can be seen as taking the position of the Dalai Lama after his demise as the next political and religious leader, since the lineage of the Karmapa is older than that of the Dalai Lama and is respected as much. He was born four years after the death of the 16th Karmapa and was the first high-ranking Lama to have been approved as the reincarnation by both the Chinese and the Tibetan authorities. He heads the “Karma Kagyu” sect and is the second most important leader in the hierarchy, after the Dalai Lama.

Till the year 2000, the 17th Karmapa was residing in the PRC, when he decided to flee. He was 14 years old at the time. It was a huge embarrassment for the PRC. The reason he gave for leaving Tibet was for higher studies, to learn from the masters the oral tradition being followed for centuries and which he was not allowed to do by the Chinese authorities. His extraordinarily dangerous flight throws light on the repression faced by many Tibetans in occupied Tibet. They are willing to make a life-threatening journey through the treacherous mountains for freedom.

Upon reaching India, the reality of his status came to the fore, as he was an illegal entrant. The Indian government no longer gave refuge to incoming refugees, and so, the thousands of Tibetans entering the Indian state on a regular basis were illegal entrants. The Dalai Lama wrote to the Union Home

Minister, asking for the Karmapa to be allowed to stay in India, to be provided protection and helped to pursue his religious education so that he could assume his title in exile. He also requested for the Karmapa to be allowed to travel, so as to fulfill his traditional education by visiting Buddhist sites and monasteries in India.¹⁶ Though India had stopped giving refugee status to the refugees, it gave asylum to the Karmapa because of his significance in Tibetan Buddhism. He will have significant power to hold sway in political decisions after the death of the Dalai Lama, and is seen by many as his successor.

The Middle Way Approach and China's Response

The middle way approach is the approach taken by the CTA and the Dalai Lama, to peacefully resolve the conflict related to the issue of the autonomy of Tibet. It is a "non-partisan and moderate position that safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties – for Tibetans: the protection and preservation of their culture, religion and national identity; for the Chinese: the security and territorial integrity of the motherland; and for neighbours and other third parties: peaceful borders and international relations."¹⁷ Tibet's stance had initially been for complete independence, but in the present scenario, the middle way of seeking autonomy seems more realistic. The Dalai Lama first expressed his intentions of a change in policy in the Strasbourg speech in June 1988, which also marks the starting process in the dialogue process between the Tibetans and the Chinese. The Dalai Lama observed, "I believe these thoughts (the middle way proposal) represent the most realistic means by which to re establish Tibet's separate identity and restore the fundamental rights of the people while accommodating China's own interest."¹⁸

This was an important move, since the Tibetans realised that negotiation and dialogue would be the best way to deal with the formidable force. Another reason was that at the time, the Chinese were showing a keen interest in dialogue. Till 1978, the Tibetan stand was that of getting full independence. The change in stance came with Deng Xiaopeng coming into power in China. Deng Xiaopeng stated that "apart from independence, all other issues can be discussed."¹⁹ The Tibetans, like most Diasporas facing the danger of imbibing elements of their host culture, saw this statement as a ray of hope after facing a series of failures over the years. The Dalai

Lama also understood that he was facing a Communist dictatorship which would squash all pursuits towards independence and if the Tibetans still continued with the demand for full independence, war and more bloodshed would be unavoidable. In Yang Jianli's view, "The Dalai Lama realised that the pursuit of independence is indeed not the best path towards happiness for the Tibetan people. Based on all these concerns, the Dalai Lama's proposal of the 'middle way' approach towards solving the Tibetan issue is extraordinarily wise and courageous."²⁰

The middle way proposal was considered pragmatic and the clauses were formulated in such a manner as to benefit both parties. It stressed on the creation of a larger Tibet, comprising all the three provinces and not just the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), giving it "genuine regional autonomy" within the PRC. This new autonomous region would be governed by a popularly elected government, which would independently govern all domestic matters like religion, culture, economy, health and environmental protection, while all matters concerning foreign affairs and defence would be dealt with by the Chinese government. It also demanded that Tibet be declared a "zone of peace" with minimum militarisation — just enough to defend it from external threats.

Over the years, China has been unaccommodating and unyielding and rejected each and every clause of the memorandum. The Chinese hold that the Tibetans want to claim "half-independence" or "covert-independence" under the garb of so-called autonomy. One analyst has observed, "They are not prepared to allow any political role for His Holiness and while they are prepared to give him a limited religious role over Buddhists in Tibet, they are not prepared to recognise any successor to the Dalai Lama in whose selection the Chinese government and the Communist administration in Lhasa had not played a leading role."²¹ The Chinese simply disregard the Dalai Lama as the representative of the Tibetans. They instead present the pre-liberated Tibet as an old feudalistic society, without any scope for modernisation, and exhibit the development that has been made now, socially and economically, as a viable contrast. Since the 2008 Olympics, the Chinese have come down hard on this issue, knowing that China is a power to reckon with and that other countries do not have a say on the issue. Since the Chinese economy is leading the world today, its cooperation and assistance to the global economy

is vital for the Western countries. China's rise as a military and economic heavyweight has helped its domination over Tibet with a tighter grip.²² The Chinese are now simply waiting for the Tibetan struggle to die with the death of the Dalai Lama.

It is an acknowledged fact now that the middle way approach, employed by the CTA and the Dalai Lama, has not yielded any concrete results, and is a failure. In the words of Samdhong Rinponche, the Prime Minister of the Central Tibetan Administration, "If the Tibet issue is not resolved amicably within five to ten years of time, there will be no more Tibet inside Tibet. It will be a completely non-Tibetans' land."²³ Therefore, they need to act fast. There is a sense of disillusionment in the exiled population as well as the people in Tibet, and the evidence of it came out in the demonstration of March 2008. The Dalai Lama himself has recognised this failure, and stated as much in a press conference in Tokyo, when he said that "the drive for greater autonomy for Tibet has ended in failure. My trust in the Chinese government has become thinner, thinner, thinner."²⁴ The Tibetans have come to the realisation that the Chinese government is not interested in peaceful coexistence; resultantly, they have not responded to negotiations and dialogue. Since resorting to violence is clearly not an option, they are looking for other alternatives. One of the new approaches taken is that the Dalai Lama has turned to the Chinese people as a source of hope rather than the Chinese government.²⁵ As long as the Communist Party stays in power in Beijing, it will not grant autonomy rights to Tibet, for that would trigger autonomy demands by other minority groups.

There are many theories being debated on how to ensure independence as opposed to autonomy for the Tibetan people. One such theory, supported by the Tibetan Youth Congress, is that complete independence is their right and they should not budge from that. In one such activist's view, "The middle way approach is, after all, a political strategy, and one that has not paid tangible dividends. Why then is it being promoted with the dogmatic zeal of a religious doctrine, unchallengeable and unshakable?"²⁶ However, the government-in-exile continues to stick to the middle way, incorporating only cosmetic changes in their policy. The intention, first, is to promote the memorandum internationally and second, to try and reach out to the ordinary Chinese citizens, instead of the government.

The Tibetan Diaspora in India and their Role in the Struggle for the Autonomy of Tibet

It is important to understand how the Tibetan Diaspora in India has contributed in the struggle for autonomy for Tibet and how they have managed to keep their identity intact over the years. The most important aspect keeping the Tibetan community together is the Dalai Lama. He is the centrifugal force behind nation-building. His authority is undisputed among the Tibetans, whether in exile or not. It has only helped the community that the Dalai Lama is not only a good religious leader, but also an able political leader, who has successfully steered the community towards peaceful resettlement and enabled them to be economically self-reliant. Personal loyalty to the Dalai Lama is the most important feature of Tibetan society. The Dalai Lama personifies what it means to be a Tibetan and through various policies, he has paved the way for the struggle to continue. He was successful in instilling unity among the exiles. He was aware that the policy of isolation did not work in the past and would only harm their cause in the future. Their movement would not gain anything in isolation, but would grow in relation to forces working within and outside Tibet, to mobilise international support and garner sympathy towards their cause. The first step the government-in-exile took was to move towards the democratisation of the CTA and abandoning the feudal structure. They have worked towards doing away with archaic traditions or at least transforming them. Some pleasant changes have come in like the transformation in marital laws. Earlier, polygamy was widely practised in Tibet, but now, after facing negative reactions from other communities, the Tibetan community has abandoned polygamy and now practises monogamy.

The most important thought that is kept alive in the minds of the people is the need to return to their homeland. The role of community memory plays an important part – an ‘imagined homeland’ is created as a common aim for all. The older generation of exiles sees it as a homeland where they grew up, while the younger generation sees it as a kind of utopia. This is invoked through cultural artifacts, e.g. pictures of the Potala Palace. Before 1959, Tibet was divided into different regions – U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo — and regionalism was an important part of individual identities. The political control of the Dalai Lama extended only in the U-Tsang region.

People travelling from Kham or Amdo to Lhasa would say, “I am going to Tibet” not realising that they were also Tibetans.²⁷ Just as the regions were important, so were the religious sects. There were five religious sects: Nyingma, Kargyu, Sakya, Geluk and Bon. These differences have faded after coming into exile, and, as Serin Houston writes, “The exterior threat of cultural extermination forces Tibetans in exile to reimagine themselves as united and pan-Buddhist, which paves over Tibet’s fractious religious and regional past.”²⁸

Keeping the cultural traditions alive was an essential tool for keeping the Tibetan identity alive in an alien land and was also imperative for the struggle. The traditions have been refashioned and, in some cases, new ones have been added: for instance, the commemoration of the 90,000 Tibetans killed during the 10 March 1959 uprising in Lhasa. The Tibetan national anthem was created in exile. These traditions unify the exiled population and are tools that cut across differences generated by class, gender, and age, uniting them toward a common cause. The Tibetans are essentially seen as peaceful and spiritual people and thousands of books are published around the world on Buddhist philosophy and spirituality, furthering this representation. The Dalai Lama himself travels around the world to spread the message of peace and tolerance. This has helped in spreading awareness about their cause, earning them a good reputation as a community and garnering moral and financial support from international organisations. The Tibetans in India are also using the internet as a major medium to spread awareness on their cause. It also helps in networking between the Diaspora around the world, organising demonstrations and gathering support from countries from all over the world. In Tibet, however, the Chinese government controls and monitors the internet traffic and censors most of the content to prevent provocative ideas from reaching and going out of Tibet.

The question of citizenship is also important. To stand for the cause, it is essential for the exiles to maintain their refugee status. Taking the citizenship of the host country is seen as a betrayal of the community. And it is considered highly patriotic to stay a refugee, since that means that one day, you will go back to your homeland.

Challenges

The challenges faced by the Tibetans are multifarious, ranging from the internal to the external. The biggest challenge at hand is that of preserving the Tibetan identity, while embracing the modern ways of living. The Tibetan Diaspora preserves their culture in the alien surroundings fiercely, though they face problems because of this obstinacy. Being faithful to the cause, they are keenly aware of the 'political and community pressures'. There are expectations, both from within and outside the community. A Tibetan is expected to wear a *chupa* while going to the monastery, and sometimes spending time with non-Tibetans can be seen as drifting away from the roots and abandoning the culture. The reason for this fear is simply because the Diaspora is widely distributed all over India and scattered in many countries of the world. Many have settled down and lead a comfortable and modern life as opposed to the many hardships their parents or grandparents faced in pre-Chinese occupied Tibet. A number of third generation Tibetans are somewhat estranged from the traditional way of life, and after living in India, with the economic and other benefits that it offers, it is hard for them to remain committed to the cause. They have become more used to the democratic, modern way of life. Going back to Tibet would mean leaving behind a comfortable life. The older generation, on the other hand, dreams of the day they will be able to return to the land which had once been their home.

Another major challenge for the Tibetans is to remain unified in their approach. The government-in-exile is facing different and more violent approaches, such as those taken by organisations like the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC). Unlike the government-in-exile's 'middle way approach', which stresses on dialogue and finding a middle path in resolution, while working towards greater autonomy for Tibet, organisations like the TYC want complete independence and are more radical in their approach. The reason for this is the growing disillusionment concerning the middle way approach, which has so far yielded no concrete results, and does not seem to have any future either. The feeling of frustration and impatience brewing among the younger generation of Tibetans was evident in the March 2008 uprising. Much of the recognition and support that the Tibetans receive from Western countries is because of the representation of Tibetans as a

spiritual and peaceful people, the Dalai Lama being the symbol of the same. This limits them in terms of the alternate, often violent options they could have taken otherwise. Resultantly, some sections of Tibetan society feel 'emasculated'. They think "that their commitment to tradition denied them their right to stay independent and as a struggling people, it has every right to choose alternative methods if peaceful methods fail."²⁹ The 13th Dalai Lama can be seen as an example who used alternative methods. He helped in the militarism for the consolidation of Tibet, including the stockpiling and production of a modern arsenal, and the creation of the Ministry of War when the Chinese threat loomed. He was then put under immense pressure by the monasteries and aristocratic class of Tibet, which led him to set aside his plans.

There are many other problems faced by the Tibetan community in India. There is growing unemployment among the Tibetan youth, which is a disturbing trend and could lead them to take drastic measures. Another cause for concern is the constant inflow of refugees from Tibet into India for better opportunities. The refugees who came to India before the 1980s were given residence permits and identity certificates which allow them to travel out of India. They were also offered citizenship. The refugees who came in the second wave, that is, after the 1980s, were not granted these privileges; they are tolerated as long as they don't get involved in any political activities. Without these privileges, they can't work, rent an apartment or even open a bank account. The government-in-exile cannot do much as they have limited authority themselves, and it encourages these exiles to go back. This action harms the goodwill that the government-in-exile has built up over the years, especially when some of them go back and talk about being spurned by their own people. The refugees who continue to live in the host country have a constant fear of being deported or being put behind bars. They also hardly have a future since they are in the country as illegal immigrants. India does not follow the international standards of the treatment of refugees and, therefore, grants several privileges on the basis of its political relations with the states in question.³⁰ The Indian government assisted the Tibetan refugees till the 1980s. It stopped encouraging them after the 1980s, because of the overpopulation of the Tibetan settlements and also in its pursuit to improve relations with China.

The Role of the Host Country

The host country – India – cannot support the Tibetan cause completely because it is bound by its commitment to have favourable relations with China. The new refugees who pour into India every year cannot be given the status of refugees, but are deemed ‘pilgrims’. Giving them refugee status officially would imply non-recognition of the Chinese authority over Tibet. The Government of India cannot do so, since India was one of the first countries to recognise China’s authority over Tibet.³¹ Hence, India gives them a safe place to practise their religion and culture and business without any external interference, but does not encourage any full-scale struggle. The Indian government makes a clear distinction between the religious and political dimension. For instance, it sees the Dalai Lama as a religious leader, not as a political one. The Tibet issue is also linked with the issue of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, and India has high stakes involved in both of them

Conclusion

The Tibetans have reached a stalemate with the Chinese government. Both parties are unwilling to move from their respective stance. In the case of a stalemate, “where neither side is able to resolve the conflict through coercion and neither benefits from continuing hostility, frustration can lead to negotiations.”³² Therefore, it is in the interest of both parties to look for common grounds to resolve the conflict and come to a negotiated agreement through the process of sustained dialogue. The Tibetan side, with higher stakes involved, is aware that time is fast running out and that they need to act soon to bring some positive changes in the dialogue process.

The exiled population, which is already disillusioned by the failure of the middle way approach, is getting more anxious, and some factions of the exiled are looking to turn to ‘organised’ violence. This action, however, would lead the Tibetan cause to lose the moral high ground that it has attained through years of non-violent struggle. They will also lose the international support that they have received so far. Another threat to the struggle is that the exiled population is fast getting assimilated into their host cultures; the second generation Tibetan exiles more so. The biggest fear, however, is whether the struggle will be able to stay on its feet after the Dalai Lama’s death. The Chinese believe that the death of the Dalai Lama will be the

death of the struggle. The government-in-exile has to act fast and needs to reach a compromise with the Chinese if they ever want to return to their homeland. The Chinese stand to benefit if they continue to show interest in negotiations and dialogue. It will generate positive public opinion in the international arena. Tibet, which is a major tourist attraction, will receive a major spurt of tourists from all over the world and this step will demonstrate China's sincerity in respecting diversity within China.

There are many changes being proposed in the middle way approach. First and foremost is that the Tibetans should reconsider their stance of autonomy of a "Greater Tibet", which includes the Kham and Amdo region. In their view, there is little possibility of China granting political autonomy to "Greater Tibet". However, in the view of this author, the Tibetans should stick to the cause of a "Greater Tibet", with sufficient cultural and regional autonomy. Asking for the autonomy only of the TAR would be discrediting the Tibetan population living in the Amdo and Kham regions, and should be ruled out as an option. This is a balanced stance which the CTA is currently following and could lead to an agreement with the Chinese. The second step should be to cease attacking China in the international arena, and to stay focussed on the dialogue. To call on the Chinese people to fight for their cause is an option that the Dalai Lama has himself resorted to. These changes, once incorporated, could lead to some positive developments in the situation.

The new approach will face many challenges. Most Tibetans feel that a compromise with their independence is not justified; for them, there can only be full independence. They see a compromise with the Chinese as a compromise with evil. Lhasang Tsering voices this discontent, when he calls the Tibetan exiles "successful refugees" but failed "freedom fighters".³³ Another major challenge would be, if ever there is an agreement, whether the exiled Tibetans would prefer going back to their homeland or remaining in their respective host countries. Most exiles are leading comfortable successful lives in exile and going back to a land which has now become alien to them is a questionable venture.

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