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Nation In Exile: The Politics Of Cultural Revivalism Of Tibetans In India

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Abstract: In this capricious world order, maintaining a rigid identity for Tibetan refugees itself becomes a challenge especially when they belong to a nation that has no geographical territory. Being born and brought up in foreign lands, Tibetans face many obstacles in their life associated with their identity and economic sustainability. Tibetan refugees are now left with the memories passed into them by their ancestors. After many failed dialogues with China, now they have been advocating for autonomy within Tibet if not full freedom. In this process, they are deliberately trying to prove their patriotism toward their motherland by reviving their culture and religious traditions in their places of refuge. Thus, Tibetans have not only re-defined and negotiated their identity as 'Tibetans' but also re-constructed their nationalism through their cultural and religious consciousness and economic practices.

Keywords: Tibetans, Nationalism, Culture, Religion, Politics.

Introduction:

Tibetan Nationalism in the contemporary world is an ideology that opens up various discourses on the independence of Tibet. The awakening of the deep sense of nationalism among Tibetans was the direct outcome of the social and economic liberalization policies adopted by the Chinese government in Tibet in the year 1979; in confidence that it would compensate for the agony and discontent amongst the Tibetans against China. But on the contrary, it allowed the exiled Tibetans to express their solidarity with their fellow Tibetans inside Tibet in a new way. It led to the basis of revivalism of culture and religion for the exiled Tibetans adding a new dimension to Tibetan Nationalism. Before that, Tibetan Nationalism was vague and limited.

Nationalism as we understand “is a sense of belonging to one nation and having been shared common indicators like history, language, culture, and ethnic community with a specific political geographical boundary, according to the primordial approach of Anthony Smith. Again, Benedict Anderson has stated that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist” (Benedict, 1991). So, in this context, Tibetan refugees not only share history and culture but also create a sense of nationalism adding significance to their identity. However, according to Dibyesh Anand “Tibet is an imagined community” A unified nation currently exists only through the anticipated (re) construction of its parts: an occupied country, dispersed communities, and a globally networked politico-cultural support system (Anand, 2000).

History:

The arrival of Tibetan Refugees into India can be divided into many phases, starting right from the year 1959 to 1979. The year following the Lhasa uprising, and the flight of the Dalai Lama, it was estimated that approximately 30,000 Tibetans entered India by November 1959. Next, it was between the years 1980-1993, following the introduction of the “Cultural Revolution” and Economic Liberation in China, when nearly about 25,000 Tibetans arrived in India via Nepal (Centre, 2016). Besides this, there is a continuous flow of Tibetan immigrants into India for various reasons like education, a pilgrimage or political escape, etc. Today it is estimated that roughly 130,000 ethnic Refugees reside in India (Centre, 2016). In India, there are two types of Tibetan communities; one that lives in settlements that are under direct administration of CTA while other groups belong to the scattered community. Both communities have maintained their distinctiveness from other communities by rigorously demonstrating and cultivating their cultural and religious traditions.

Immediately after the influx of Tibetans into India in the year 1959; with the help of the Indian government and various other supports groups His Holiness Dalai lama was successful in establishing an autonomous Government known as the “Central Tibetan Administration” (CTA) in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh in India. CTA, later in the year 1990, adopted the model of a democratic form of government. CTA is portrayed as the de-facto government of Tibet in exile and has been functioning as the sole administrator of the exiled community. It is responsible for all socio-economic development undertakings and the political authority for exiled Tibetan worldwide. The CTA’s first motive was to relocate Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal and to other destinations. It wanted to preserve and develop Tibet’s language, culture, history, religious traditions, and educational systems. India started the rehabilitation process first by establishing settlements by leasing land in the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, South Sikkim, West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Orissa (Centre, 2016). Besides the rehabilitation of Tibetans, the restoration and reconstruction of their religious institutions along with the revival of culture and religious practices in their daily ways of life became the prime focus for the rebuilding of Tibetan autonomous social and political life.

Considering Part III of The Indian Constitution where it has been mentioned that Indian citizenship can be acquired through birth, registration, naturalization, and incorporation of territory. And under section 6 “A foreigner not being an illegal migrant can acquire Indian Citizenship on the application for naturalization to

the Government of India. Herewith, Tibetan refugees qualify to acquire Indian Citizenship under these provisions. Tibetans are required to submit a “No Objection Certificate” from the CTA. Though CTA discourages them from acquiring Indian citizenship. Many opt for it depending on their need and circumstances (Centre T. J., 2011). However, there is a great dilemma regarding the acquisition of Citizenship amongst Tibetans. But ultimately this decision is left to individual choice.

Indian government from the very beginning has provided every possible support to the Tibetan refugees. The Indian government has assisted them in setting up educational institutions comprising both primary and higher education serving the secular and religious needs of the Tibetans. The different monasteries have been established for the training of monks and religious purposes. There are different types of schools for Tibetans in India, like Tibetan Children Village (TCV) School, Tibetan Homes Foundation, and Transit school for new arrivals. Transit schools provide English and Tibetan language instruction and vocational training to make Tibetan people self-reliant. Tibetan, as a vernacular language is used as the medium of instruction in all Tibetan schools till grade V and second language from grade V to XII. It is called the policy of “Tibetanisation of education” (Centre T. J., 2011). All Tibetan schools are administered by the CTA Dept. of Education and Central Tibetan Administration, which is an independent institution that falls within the jurisdiction of the Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development. Apart from this, many Tibetan children nowadays attend local schools and some pursue advanced professional courses from Indian universities and institutions. Indian government provides reservation policies annually in engineering, medicine, pharmaceuticals, and printing technology.

After years of struggle; many have shifted to Switzerland, North America, and other European countries as well. At present, Tibetans are global citizens. Tibetan refugees with their social, economic, and political survival strategies in being “Tibetan” in the process of nation-building in exile have a very extraordinary history. The bitter memories of elders impact their lives and remain a driving force behind their motive of preserving and transmitting ethnic, cultural, and religious legacies to the succeeding generations. As soon as they were rehabilitated in India. They started constructing monasteries and other monuments in their place of refuge. They started rebuilding the replica of their lost heritage back in Tibet. There are 208 monasteries and 17 nunneries with an additional 6 cultural centers for the study of spiritual Tibetan traditions in India (Analyses, 2012). Particularly in the Himalayan regions like Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Kalimpong as well as in the Aravalli Range. In addition, hundreds of Tibetans enter India for pilgrimage every year during Kalachakra Tantra in Amravati in Andhra Pradesh or Bodhgaya in Bihar.

Along with the formation of many Tibetan organizations like the Tibetan Women organization and Tibetan Youth Congress, they started articulating their identity without being influenced or diluted by the forces of modernity and or the Western culture. Rather they tried to hold their communities by organizing Lhasa Uprising Day on March 10 and started celebrating other Tibetan ceremonies to keep their traditions alive which will again spread awareness about their history and culture among youths.

Revivalism of Tibetan Culture:

Over time, Tibetans re-initiated their traditional expertise in weaving carpets, Woolen garments, and handicraft-making skills as a source of income and a means of livelihood. With time, Woolen sweaters, carpets, and other handicraft items were widely acknowledged and thus, it became their main occupation. In due course, many people established small businesses like garment shops, shops selling souvenirs, Thanks, and paintings, small eateries, etc in town areas where they have been reinstated. Today most of them are successful entrepreneurs. Tibetans presently have become pure businessmen in many towns and cities like Darjeeling, Dehradun, Dharamsala, Mussoorie, etc., and all the places where they have settled down, particularly along the Himalayan belt. The Woolen business commonly known as the Tibetan market or Bhutia market during the winter season in many Indian towns has become their identity amongst the mainland Indian people. Even in Delhi; Manju-ka-Tilla and Ladakh Buddha Vihara Market in Delhi are famous for winter clothes and Tibetan food. On the other hand, the settlements which were provided with additional land made agriculture their source of livelihood like in Sikkim, Odisha, and Bylakuppe in Karnataka. Many educated youths have been working in their own CTA, and other offices related to administration. Many of them have become doctors, engineers, teachers, nurses, and other professionals, and at present, many of them have the greater ambition to settle abroad for a better future.

Tibetans became more resistant to ideological coercion due to an increased sense of common solidarity toward their motherland and the realization that they have large support groups for Tibet's freedom which cannot be overlooked by the Chinese for long. Tibetans have been struggling for the autonomy of Tibet even after so many decades. The most important aspect of keeping the Tibetan community unified is the "Dalai Lama". Even Though He stepped down from his political position, personal loyalty to him is the most important feature of Tibetan society. Dalai Lama and His popularity is the most basic reason behind the integration of Tibetan nationalism. Despite several failed attempts at dialogue with Beijing on the status of Tibet, Tibetans have kept their faith in his leadership.

Another factor that has worked for Tibetans in keeping their cause alive is the internationalization of Tibet's autonomy issue. Dalai Lama's advocacy for autonomy for Tibet in a peaceful non-violent manner makes him a charismatic leader respected by the international community. After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 1989, the Dalai Lama has become a role model of spirituality, compassion, peace, and tolerance in the world. Tibetans regard him as an "Institution" rather than just a monk: which he calls himself. Just because of his image and popularity he has been successful in soliciting international support. through his philosophy of non-violence, selflessness, and political struggle. At first, it helped him in lobbying with the Western film industry and secured the media industry's profits through their celebrity status lastly, he organized concerts, reading, and fund-raising events for Tibet. So, the selling of a particular image of Tibet helps to motivate support from the international community and to generate loyalty within the national community too (Roemer, 2008, p. 150). All this has been possible due to His personality and diplomatic efforts. He has also become the face of Buddhism in the international community.

Conclusion:

Despite getting so much favoritism and support from the Indian Government. Yet Tibetans have been advocating for the independence of Tibet even after many years of exile. India seeks to tackle the Tibetan issue diplomatically by allowing Tibetans freedom of religion, culture, and social life. Tibetans are allowed to live in peace without any interference as such from the Indian government. On many occasions, they have shown their distrust, frustration, and anger against China from India. Theoretically to China, this implies non-recognition of the Chinese control over Tibet as such it challenges the sovereignty of China. During the time of Manmohan Singh police would impose a lockdown in the Tibetan area of New Delhi and beat up Tibetans who attempted to rally. Even the Dalai Lama was allowed to speak during Xi's visit and earlier Lobsang Sangay was invited to the swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi in May (Chellaney, 2014). There has been an incident of self-immolation in 2018 in Delhi when the Chinese ambassador visited India. But it is also the fact that India never encourages Tibetans to indulge in any kind of violent political action against China. The government of India has recognized 'Dalai Lama only as a religious head and not a political one and from the very beginning, Nehru had made it clear that India granted asylum to the Tibetans on humanitarian grounds keeping in mind the cultural religious, and commercial links between the two nations. This makes clear that the Indian government has made a clear distinction between the religious and political dimensions of the Tibetan issue. Yet, at the same time, the de facto CTA dictates the entire Tibetan community over the world and the Dalai Lama exercises his diplomatic moves from Indian soil only. He often expresses his opinion and statements on many issues of Tibetan autonomy and adjustments with China and also on various disputes related to political relations and border disputes between India and China. Even after living in exile for many decades, Tibetans face many obstacles in their political and economic life concerning their identity and economic sustainability. Yet they have profoundly employed their culture and religious traditions to retain their nationalism and determination to return to "free- Tibet".

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