

Authors affiliation

Associate Professor in Political
Science Dr Hari Singh Gour
University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh
470003, India.

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Anupma Kaushik, Associate
Professor in Political Science Dr
Hari Singh Gour University,
Sagar, Madhya Pradesh 470003, India.
E-mail:
kaushikanupma@yahoo.co.in

Tibetans Refugees: Struggle of a Displaced People

Anupma Kaushik

Introduction

Tibetans regard Tibet as an independent country while Chinese view it as part of China. The Tibetans led by the Dalai Lama believe that Tibet was colonized by China by force in 1949-50. They claim that at the time of its invasion by troops of the People's Liberation Army of China in 1949, Tibet was an independent state in fact and law [1]. They claim that they tried to reach an amicable solution with the Chinese government for nine years i.e., till 1959 when the Dalai Lama had to escape to India fearing personal insecurity [2]. In India, as the leader of Tibetans he took the position that he will return to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, only when he can obtain the rights and powers which Tibet enjoyed and exercised prior to 1950 [3]. In effect he was asking for an independent Tibet with return of all the territories taken by the Chinese [4]. He also feared that the ultimate aim of Chinese was to attempt the extermination of religion and culture of Tibet and even the absorption of Tibetan race [5]. Tibetans claimed large scale human rights violations in Tibet by Chinese [6]. Till 1967 the Dalai Lama expressed determination to regain the freedom of his people and wished that Tibet be turned into a zone of peace [7]. However the initial attention given by the world dwindled and would be revived only when massive human rights violation would take place in Tibet. The Dalai Lama accepted that although Tibetans want complete independence Chinese will never accept it [8]. He also understood that world although sympathetic neglected Tibet because it was very difficult to help Tibet since China had already occupied it and also because China is a very important country for economic and geo-political reasons. He

also realized that the main factor had to be the will and determination of Tibetans. However he believed that right is right and wrong is wrong and world public opinion does have an impact on Chinese, hence the need for educating the world. He was ready to give the Chinese the benefit of doubt saying that Chinese may have really felt that they are liberating Tibet as they are unaware of Tibetan mentality [8]. In 1988 the Dalai Lama proposed *meaningful autonomy for Tibet within China*. He repeated his committed to non-violence. The Tibetan tactics was to negotiate with China while continuing to educate the world through non-violent, peaceful means such as demonstrations, seminars and talks in order to build pressure on China [10]. The Dalai Lama has been trying to democratize the exiled Tibetan community and direct elections for the post of Kalon Tripa or prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile has been introduced. The Dalai Lama is also trying to reduce the dependence of exiled Tibetans on himself. Thus Tibetans aim at preserving their culture as refugees while seeking real autonomy for Tibet in China.

Tibetan Refugees

The estimated number of Tibetan refugees living in exile or outside China is 150,000. The migration happened in three waves. The first wave started in 1959 following the 14th Dalai Lama's self exile in India; the second wave started in 1980s when Tibet was opened to trade and tourism and the third wave continues from 1996 to today. During the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the 14th Dalai Lama and some of his government officials fled to India. From 1959 to

1960 about 80,000 Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama to India through the Himalayas. Continued flights, estimated in numbers of 1000 to 2500 a year increased these numbers to 100,000. The movement of refugees during this time is sometimes referred to as an exodus and as evidence of human rights abuses in Tibet. The second exodus happened in 1980s due to increasing political repression. From 1986 to 1996 about 25000 Tibetans fled Tibet and their numbers in India increased by 18 per cent. Now about 3000 to 4500 Tibetans arrive at Dharamsala in India every year. Many new immigrants are children who are sent to Tibetan cultural schools sometimes with the tacit approval of the Chinese government. Many political activists also cross over through Nepal to India [11]. Although in recent years they have encountered difficulties in Nepal due to unsympathetic attitude of Nepal's government due to pressure from China.

Tibetan Refugees in India

Following the Lhasa uprising and Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet in 1959, the government of India accepted a large number of Tibetan refugees. There are fluctuating claims regarding numbers of Tibetans living in India. The Central Tibetan administration of the Dalai Lama claims that worldwide there are 127,935 Tibetan refugees of which India has 94,203; Nepal has 13,514; Bhutan has 1,298 and rest of the world has 18,920 [12]. Other sources claim that there are 1,20,000 Tibetan refugees in India [13].

The government of India has provided land for Tibetan refugee settlements in various states especially in Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka. The Dalai Lama resides in Dharamsala in the state of Himachal Pradesh however largest numbers of Tibetan refugees are in the state of Karnataka. The government of India extends financial help to the Dalai Lama and has built special schools and educational institutions for Tibetans that provide free education, health care and scholarships. Few medical and engineering seats are reserved for Tibetans. Tibetans live in India with a stay permit which is processed through a document called Registration Certificate (RC). It is renewed every year. Every Tibetan refugee above the age of 16 must register for the stay permit. The Indian government issues 'Yellow Books' after one year processing with RC, which allow Tibetans to travel abroad [14]. The high court has ruled that Tibetans born in India are eligible for Indian citizenship [15]. However Tibetans born in India choose not to apply for Indian citizenship as they fear it will have a bad impact on the psychology of

Tibetans living in Tibet. Moreover the Tibetans in India will also cease to be representative or spokespersons of Tibetans. They formally recognize the help that India has extended to them in the form of land for settlement and funds and deny that they face any hardships in India [16]. However under pressure from China, the government of India stops Tibetans from indulging in anti-China activities. The erstwhile prime minister of the Dalai Lama Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche claims that asking for freedom is not an anti-China activity. On the contrary he claims it to be a pro-China activity as it means more freedom for Chinese people, more respect for human rights and more respect for different cultures. He argues that Tibetans in India are not asking for separation of Tibet from China so they are not indulging in anti-China activity. He assures that Tibetan leadership does not want to cause any inconvenience for India [17].

The Dalai Lama maintains a government in exile in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh which coordinates political and welfare activities for Tibetans in India. It is called the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) or Tsenjol Bod Zhung gi Drigtsug in Tibetan language. It states its goal as rehabilitating Tibetan refugees and restoring freedom and happiness in Tibet. It was established in 1959 shortly after the Dalai Lama came to India. While its internal structure is government like, it has stated that it is not designed to take power in Tibet rather it will be dissolved as soon as freedom is restored in Tibet and a government is formed by Tibetans in Tibet. The CTA claims to represent the people of entire Tibet Autonomous Region and Qinghai province as well as two Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and one Tibetan County in Sichuan Province, one Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and one Tibetan Autonomous County in Gansu Province and one Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province- all of which is termed 'Historic Tibet' by CTA. The CTA runs schools, health services, cultural activities and economic development projects for Tibetan Community and also tries to infuse and maintain nationalism among them. It has created the Tibetan Uprising Day holiday and a Tibetan national anthem. More than 1000 refugees still arrive in India each year from China mostly via Nepal. The government of India allows the CTA to exercise effective jurisdiction in these matters over the Tibetan community in northern India. On 11 February the CTA became a founding member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) at a ceremony held at the Peace Palace in The Hague, the Netherlands [18].

Tibetans living outside Tibet can apply at the CTA office in their country of residence for a 'Green Book'

which serves as a receipt book for the person's voluntary contribution to the CTA and the evidence of his claims for 'Tibetan citizenship'. For this purpose, CTA defines a Tibetan as 'any person born in Tibet, or any person with one parent born in Tibet'. As Tibetan refugees often lack documents attesting to their place of birth, the eligibility is usually established by an interview [19].

The CTA operates under the 'Charter of the Tibetans In-Exile' adopted in 1991. The government in exile has an elected parliament in exile consisting of 44 members; a Tibetan supreme judicial commission and a cabinet called Kashag. The executive authority is vested in the Kalon Tripa. The Kalon Tripa or the prime minister is elected directly by the exile population for a term of five years. Under the Kashag are the main departments of Religion and Culture, Home, Education, Finance, Security, Information and International Relations and Health. Officially, its annual revenue is US\$22 million with \$7 million for political activities and \$4.5 million for administration. Legislative authority is vested in the Parliament of CTA. It has foreign missions in New Delhi, Kathmandu, New York, London, Geneva, Moscow, Brussels, Canberra, Tokyo, Pretoria and Taipei. At the time of founding of CTA the Dalai Lama was the head of government and head of state of CTA. Over the ensuing decades, a gradual transition to democratic governance was effected. The first elected Kalon Tripa was a Buddhist monk called Samdhong Rinpoche or Lobsang Tenzin. The second Kalon Tripa is Lobsang Sangay. The CTA is not recognized as a sovereign government by any country but it receives financial aid from many governments and international organizations for its welfare work among Tibetan exile community in India [20].

Major NGOs are Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), National Democratic Party of Tibet (NDPT) and Gu-Chu-Sum Movement. Tibetans in India are engaged in agriculture, agro-industries, carpet weaving and export, and service sector. The winter sweater selling business is the economic mainstay of about 70 per cent of the exile population in India. School enrolment is 85 to 90 per cent of the school aged children in exile [21].

Tibetans in India have duplicated Tibetan monasteries and they now house tens of thousands of monks. They have created Tibetan schools and hospitals and founded the Library of Tibetan Works and archives in order to preserve and continue Tibetan culture and traditions. Tibetan festivals such as Losar (Tibetan New Year), Monlam prayer festival and dances continue in exile.

The plight of the Tibetan refugees garners international attention. The Dalai Lama, who resides in India, won the Nobel peace prize in 1989 in recognition of his unswerving commitment to peaceful protest against the Chinese occupation of Tibet. He is highly regarded and has been received by government leaders throughout the world. He was given the Congressional Gold Medal by President Bush in 2007 and honorary Canadian citizenship. The Chinese government consistently protests each official contact of the Dalai Lama with world leaders [22]. The Chinese leaders accuse the Dalai Lama of misleading some political leaders and also being used by some western countries [23].

Till now the Dalai Lama has been central to the Tibetan issue. He is regarded as the incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of love and compassion and revered by Tibetans and respected by others all over the world [24]. Tibetans place his photographs in houses, restaurants, on buses, necklaces, t-shirts and postcards. He has brought world attention to Tibet but the Dalai Lama poses a problem for Tibetans. They worry about the day when he is no more. As per the tradition the death of a Dalai Lama leads to a search for reincarnation, with regents in control till the child recognized as Dalai Lama reaches eighteen years of age. This creates a void in leadership. Tibetans fear that when the fourteenth Dalai Lama dies the Chinese will choose their own reincarnation. The Dalai Lama has said that to avoid such a situation his reincarnation will be born outside Tibet. Moreover Tibetans fear they will lose their most popular face when the fourteenth Dalai Lama is no more. So he is democratizing the Tibetans. Tibetans accept the change out of deference to the Dalai Lama and also because they recognize his worth [25]. The Dalai Lama is investing his faith in democracy as he wants to create a system and culture of accountability within the Tibetan community [26]. Although Tibetans are very emotional about the Dalai Lama they also recognize that democratization of Tibetans in exile and retirement of the Dalai Lama is a pragmatic political decision involving long term interests of the Tibetan struggle and survival as a nation without having to depend upon one person [27].

The Central Tibetan Schools Administration is an autonomous organization with a seat in New Delhi. It was established in 1961 with the objective to establish, manage and assist schools in India for the education of Tibetan children living in India while preserving and promoting their culture and heritage.

Migration of young people from Tibetan settlements in India is a serious cause of concern as it threatens Tibetan identity and culture. Migration happens due to lack of employment opportunities in the community. Dilution of culture also happens due to Indian movies and television programs [28].

Lobsang Sangay the directly elected prime minister of the Tibetans in exile acknowledges the assistance given to Tibetans refugees in India, calling India their second home. He hopes for the continued support to Tibetan refugees by India [29].

Tibetan Refugees in Nepal

About 3000 Tibetans flee Tibet through Nepal annually and approximately 20,000 reside in various settlements scattered throughout Nepal. The Tibetans in Nepal can be divided in two broad groups. The first group is of those who arrived in Nepal before 1989 when Nepal permitted refugees and the second group is of those who arrived after 1989 when Nepal ceased to permit newly arrived Tibetans to remain in Nepal. The former group enjoys an unwritten right to remain in Nepal but little else. They and their children live in an uneasy state of subsistence characterized by limited political and economic rights and an undefined legal status. The latter group cannot remain in Nepal. Nepalese law deems them to be illegal aliens and that they may be deported. However due to an informal arrangement or gentleman's agreement between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Nepalese government these refugees should be able to transit safely through Nepal and seek refuge and assistance from Tibetan government in exile in India [30]. The problem is that Nepal has been offered huge economic assistance (US \$ 70 million) by China in exchange of anti Tibetan stance by the government of Nepal [31]. Now the government of Nepal tries to repatriate the Tibetan refugees who come to Nepal, after a harrowing journey, crossing the Himalayas on foot, hiding in day and walking in night to avoid arrest by Chinese security forces. To avoid repatriation to China by Nepal the human rights activists had to bring intense diplomatic pressure on the government of Nepal. Many Tibetans who try to escape die or get killed [32]. Tibetan activists say that they remain largely alienated from Nepalese society and at times they are blamed for social, economic and political problems of Nepal. Tibetan activists allege that Tibetan refugees arriving in Nepal face *refoulement* and police abuse. Nepalese police encourages the refugees to return to China on gun point [33].

Tibetan Refugees in Bhutan

Few Tibetans settled in Bhutan after 1959, as the country is mainly used as a transit route to India. However in 1961, following tensions between China and India, India sealed its northern border with Bhutan. The government of Bhutan agreed to take in 4000 settlers although ordinary Bhutanese became increasingly resentful of the Tibetan immigrants because of their refusal to assimilate into Bhutanese culture. In 1974, twenty nine Tibetans, including the representative of the Dalai Lama in Thimpu were arrested and accused of a conspiracy to assassinate the King Jigme Sime Wangchuck. In 1979 the government of Bhutan said that those without Bhutanese citizenship would be repatriated back to China. Despite CTA's opposition 2300 Tibetans applied for citizenship and most of the remainder resettled in India [34].

Tibetans in Europe

Tibetans in Europe are not as politically active or un-integrated into the host country as Tibetans in India, because they do not live in concentrated communities and are educated in local schools instead of living under a special Tibetan jurisdiction as Tibetans in India do. In Europe, Tibetans have been received more positively than other immigrants to Europe, and are stereotyped as spiritual and victims. Politically, organizations such as the Tibetan Youth Association in Europe attempt to cultivate a Tibetan identity for Tibetans in Europe. However, many Tibetan youths in Europe cannot speak Tibetan language and do not feel they belong to a wider Tibetan community [35].

Tibetans in the USA

Tibetans began to immigrate to the United States of America in the late 1950s. The Immigration Act of 1990 gave a boost to the Tibetan immigration to Tibetans living in India and Nepal. By 2008 the Tibetan-American population had grown to around 9000 according to Central Tibetan Administration. The 2000 United States Census counted 5147 US residents who reported Tibetan ancestry. They are concentrated in 22 clusters located primarily in the Northeast, the Great Lakes region and the Intermountain West. Despite the protests by the office of Tibet and the Tibetan Americans themselves,

Tibetan Americans who are born in Tibet or elsewhere in China, and fled to protect their identity as Tibetans are officially recognized as Chinese nationals [36].

Tibetan Independence Movement

The Tibetan independence movement is a movement for the independence of the lands where Tibetan people live and the political separation of those lands from the People's Republic of China. It is principally led by the Tibetan diasporas in countries like India and the United States, and by celebrities and Tibetan Buddhists in the United States and Europe. The movement is not supported by the Dalai Lama, who advocates meaningful autonomy since 1988, although he had advocated independence from 1961 to late 1970s. To legitimize claim to independence campaigners assert that Tibet has been historically independent. Campaigners also argue that Tibetans are currently ill-treated and denied certain human rights in China and want China to grant independence to Tibet. Various organizations with overlapping campaigns for independence and human rights have sought to create public opinion in support of Tibet and against China. Organizations which support Tibet independence movement include: Free Tibet Campaign; Tibetan independence Movement; Tibetan Youth Congress; International Tibet Independence Movement; International Tibet Aid Organization; International Tibet Support Network and United Nations for a Free Tibet. Free Tibet Campaign is located in London in UK and stands for the right of Tibetans to determine their own future and for future of their country since 1987. Tibetan Independence Movement started within Tibet and lasted from 1987 to 1989. Chinese crackdown led to arrests and imprisonment of members. Tibetan Youth Congress is located at Dharamsala in India and claims a membership of 30,000. International Tibet Independence Movement is located in Indiana in United States since 1995. International Tibetan Aid Organization is located in Amsterdam in Netherlands since 2004. International Tibet support Network is located in London in UK since 2000 and is an umbrella organization for Tibet related organizations worldwide. United Nations for a Free Tibet is located in Los Angeles in the United States since 2010 and creates awareness for Tibet [37].

Conclusion

Tibetans have been fleeing from China since 1959 as they claim that their identity is being wiped out by the policies of the government of China. However they have been able to preserve their identity only in India and Nepal. In other countries they lose their Tibetan identity and are unable to preserve their culture due to their small numbers as well as because of the policies of these countries. Hence the question remains about the future of Tibetan refugees.

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