

# **Re-imagining Identity through Direct Democracy: Collective Constructions of Tibetan Refugees in Bylakuppe, Karnataka**

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on one of the most proactive and successful refugee communities - the Tibetan refugees in India. It attempts to show, how through concerted and sustained efforts, the Tibetan refugees in India have used their time in exile to usher in a new cultural revolution. Usually the refugee communities have no other choice but to integrate with the host community. However, ever since their arrival the Tibetan refugees have always insisted on retaining their distinct identity. Perceiving their exile as being temporary, their concern is using their time in exile as a preparation for their eventual return to a free Tibet. Hence, maintaining their identity through ideology of non-assimilation assumes paramount importance.

For the reorganisation of refugee community in India and to guide the Tibetan struggle for self rule, the Dalai Lama set up the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the seat of the Tibetan Government in Exile. The CTA has facilitated the previously unknown democratisation of Tibetan political and social system. Through their participation in the imagining and creation of the cultural and moral cores of their community, the refugees develop a sense of collective identity. This leads to the formation of collective constructions which is a key factor governing the strength of the Tibetan community and Tibetan movement in India.

This paper seeks to understand how the Tibetan Government in Exile, though not recognised by the world political body, maintains its legitimacy, for the successive generations of Tibetan refugees. Using the notion of collective constructions as a theoretical framework, the main aim of this paper is to understand the socio-cultural dynamics of communitarian collective constructions through democratic processes of Tibetan 'nation without a state'. This paper will examine how these democratic processes contribute to cultural retention in exile as against the project of cultural annihilation undertaken by China.

## **Introduction**

Refugee formation is, in many ways a direct consequence of the attempts made by the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia to import the Western notion of Nation State. The modern nation state with its homogenising principle led to the creation of minorities - those that refused to be homogenised. In its extreme, this intolerance of difference leads to a situation, where people were forced to flee their motherland and become refugees.

The persecution and alienation that defines the refugee, both in his home and host country gives the impression that a refugee is condemned to dictates beyond his control. While the refugees are victims of statecraft and the discursive power of nationalism and human rights, they are at the same time, active agents of social transformation and socio economic progress.

### **Tibetan Refugees in Bylakuppe**

This paper focuses on one of the most resilient and successful refugee communities - the Tibetan refugees in India. Secluded for centuries from the rest of the world, Tibetans faced a massive threat to their culture and identity, when the People's Republic of China marched into Tibet in 1949. Led by their supreme leader, the XIV Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, the Tibetans not only survived, their settlements in exile are often the last bastion of Tibetan culture and heritage. For the reorganisation of refugee community in India and to guide the Tibetan struggle for self rule, the Dalai Lama set up the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the seat of the Tibetan Government in Exile. The CTA has facilitated the previously unknown democratisation of Tibetan political and social system. This paper seeks to understand how the Tibetan Government in Exile, though not recognised by the world political body, maintains its legitimacy, for the successive generations of Tibetan refugees. Using the notion of collective constructions as a theoretical framework, the main aim of this paper is to understand the socio-cultural dynamics of communitarian collective constructions through democratic processes of Tibetan 'nation without a state'. This paper examines how these democratic processes contribute to cultural retention in exile as against the project of cultural annihilation undertaken by China.

While the notion of refugees existed since Biblical times, refugee formation is largely a twentieth century phenomenon. It is often a direct consequence of the attempts made by the newly independent countries in Africa and Asia who transplanted the Western ideal of nation state in their own territories. The modern nation state with its homogenising principle led to the ideal of a unified cultural identity. Those that refused to be homogenised were looked upon as the 'other'. In its extreme, this intolerance of difference led to a situation where people were forced to flee their motherland and become refugees.

The persecution and alienation that defines the refugee, both in his home and host country, give the impression that a refugee is condemned to dictates beyond her/his control. While the refugees are victims of statecraft and the discursive power of nationalism and human rights, they are at the same time active agents of social transformation. They try to counter the experiences of loss, marginality and displacement by developing a sense of diasporic consciousness. In this paper, I have examined how the Tibetans, through their Government in Exile, have been successful in developing this sense of diasporic consciousness to such an extent, that they have been able to preserve their otherness, their distinct identity and avoid assimilation with the Indian nation state.

### **The Nation State and the Perpetuation of the 'Other'**

The nation state is a European construct, where nation was largely coterminous with the state. The nation, in turn, consolidated itself around either territory or ethnicity. In the twentieth century, when the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa imported the concept of nation state and applied it to their heterogeneous realities, problems arose. Even in supposedly homogenous nations of Europe, which have a sense of shared values and history, the situation is changing with the influx of migration. Nevertheless, the fact that multinational states are today almost a universal reality does not diminish the ideal of an overlap between nation and state. Such a nation state, which aspires for homogeneity in the face of persistent heterogeneity, makes every effort to promote a sense of national cultural identity in order to limit communitarian divisions within their

own space and to help people to identify with each other (Bauman 2004). Those who do not conform to this homogenised national community are stereotyped as the 'Other'. For Gillespie (2006), 'othering' leads people towards a widespread tendency to differentiate 'ingroup' from 'outgroup' and 'Self' from 'Other' in such a way as to reinforce and protect the 'Self'. In an attempt to reinforce the 'Self', the 'Other' is at times pushed beyond the boundaries of the imagined community and forced to flee as refugees.

The idea of nation state also implies a political entity with well-defined unambiguous territorial boundaries. This ideal, again when transported to Asia and Africa, led to unprecedented changes. In a bid to legitimize their existence, the newly constituted nation states often re-defined themselves around ideologies like capitalism, and communism. Leftist (Marxist-Leninist) revolutions, inspired by visions of an equitable society based on socialism, challenged traditional social structures. These revolutionaries may consciously use nationalist sentiments to consolidate revolutionary changes (Keely 1996: 1055). These changes that invariably involve dominance and violence, lead to a large number of refugees. The system of nation states systematically denies that possibility through its insistence upon the principle of sovereignty and the state's hegemony over questions of identity (Xenos 1994: 427). The Tibetan refugees are a fall-out of such attempts to formalize the boundaries of The People's Republic of China and establish a strong ideological linkage between state and society. This political praxis took place during the hey days of the Cultural Revolution in China.

### **China - Tibet Polemics and Birth of Refugees**

The status of Tibet has been a contentious issue since the twentieth century. While China claims that Tibet was a part of its territory since the thirteenth century, its current stand on the issue took shape only after the People's Republic of China (PRC) came into being. To question the legitimacy of Tibet's incorporation into PRC is to question the legitimacy of the idea of the Chinese State as constructed by the Chinese Communist Party; it is to raise questions against the cultural and political nationalism that has been fostered within the PRC and has fundamental bearing on the identity

of modern China (Sperling 2004:5). The Tibetan position on its relationship with China and on the Chinese invasion, keeps changing in an attempt to build a vision of Tibet that reflects the new sense of nationalism that grew out of the 1959 revolt and the years of exile that followed. Discussing Tibet's status vis-a-vis China, and the intricacies of what Tibetans see as invasion, are beyond the scope of this paper. In a nutshell, it is suffice to say that after China occupied/ liberated Tibet in 1949, in 1950 the People's Republic Army of China, marched into and occupied Tibet. The reason given for this move was that the Chinese wanted to liberate Tibet from imperialists and from the aristocrats, and allow Tibet to join the motherland. In 1951, with the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement between the representatives of the Governments of China and Tibet, Tibet became an autonomous region of China. Though he was disappointed with the signing of the Agreement, the Dalai Lama was nevertheless hopeful. He thought that with the Agreement, though Tibet lost her independence, China would at least ensure the religious and cultural autonomy of Tibet. But this was not to be. For nine years there were fruitless attempts at negotiations between the Governments of China and Tibet. Chinese attacks on Tibet and Tibetans, including their religion, continued unabated. In March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled to India. Following the Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans fled to India as refugees.

### **Tibetan Refugees and Collective Construction of Identity**

Of the millions that have fled their homeland, seeking refuge and a new life in host societies the world over, the Tibetans stand out. They have taken refuge in a neighbouring country which has traditionally been their spiritual guru, not as individuals alone, but rather as a national policy that has escaped the destruction taking place in Tibet. Though the Tibetans were forbidden from using India as a base to fight their political battle against China, they were given carte blanche in their struggle against perceived cultural extinction. When a symbiotic national community with specific political and geo-cultural boundaries gets dismantled, it leads to the

collective construction of a sense of community among the members of the former national community. In an attempt to compensate for his alleged personal guilt and to placate the critics of his pro-China policy, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister took personal interest in facilitating the Tibetans in their goal of rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees, and constructing and sustaining their collective identity through language and religion. The Dalai Lama with the support of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) soon got on with the task of the creation and sustenance of a unified Tibetan community in the face of disparity with regard to the Tibetan populace.

The focus of this paper is on the efforts undertaken by the Central Tibetan Administration at collective constructions of identity in exile. Through their participation in the imagining and creation of the cultural and moral cores of their community, the refugees develop a sense of collective identity. This leads to the formation of collective constructions which is a key factor governing the strength of the Tibetan community and Tibetan movement in India. Investigating the collective constructions of a group means studying both, the ways members see themselves as group members, and how they build and are influenced by their *habitas* (Ben Rafael et al. 2006: 14). Thus, through the theoretical lens of collective constructions, this paper examines the process of re-imagining of identity through direct democracy of Tibetans in exile in India.

### **Direct Democracy as a Consequence of Exile**

Forsdyke (2005: 2) draws a linkage between exile and political power in the Archaic and Classical period in Greece. He argues that the revolution by which the democracy was established was a direct outcome of a particularly violent episode of intra-elite politics of exile. Though exile played an important role in the legitimation of democratic rule in the initial stages of democracy, in contemporary times democracy is associated largely with the nation states. In fact, democracy is seen as the most appropriate form of governance for the nation state.

In this context, the Tibetan case appears unique, as democracy arrived with the dissolution of Tibet as a separate entity. Prior to 1959, Tibet was a theocratic state with the supreme political

power vested in the Dalai Lamas. The exile community therefore had no direct experience of democratic governance when it came to India, and the participatory democracy developed by the Dalai Lama and Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) since 1960 was the first in Tibet's history. In my opinion, the democracy practised by the Tibetans in exile is more of a direct democracy.

Frechette (2007: 98) argues that the Tibetan exiles are in a democratic transition, as they have embraced democracy as a normative ideal towards which they are reforming their political system. Though not legally recognised by any country in the world, including India, the Tibetan case is a social fact of how a Government can provide legitimacy and function in exile. Despite the limitations brought about by their status as refugees, their exile position hastened their efforts at democratisation. The absence of entrenched landholding interests in exile, which enabled new structures of governance to emerge, favourable host government policies, as well as considerable international aid, contingent at times on democratic reforms, assisted their efforts (Frechette 2007: 99).

The Tibetan Government in exile was re-established by the Dalai Lama with the setting up of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) at Dharamsala in the Himalayan State of Himachal Pradesh in India in 1959. The aim was to organise the refugee community and to guide the Tibetan struggle for self-rule. In many ways, the Tibetan refugee community is one of the most successful refugee communities in the world. A large part of the credit for the Tibetan success story should go to the efforts made by the CTA.

The CTA comprises of the Kashag, i.e. the cabinet with eight ministers called kalon, with the Kalon Tripa, that is the Prime Minister (now called Sikyong, i.e. political leader) as Chief of Cabinet. Whereas earlier the Dalai Lama played a crucial role in these elections, now these elections are more democratic, with the Kalon Tripa being directly elected by the people. In 1963 a Constitution - the Charter of the Tibetans in Exile - was adopted by the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies (ATPD). The Assemblies are structured around the Tibetan homeland, rather than the exile communities.

Such an arrangement predisposes the assembly to discuss homeland issues (about which it could do little) rather than issues that arose within the exile communities.

The exile administration controls such resources as school admission, health care benefits, pensions, scholarship opportunities, direct aid to the desperately poor, and employment in the administration and its many businesses. Through this framework, the exile administration is able to govern effectively in the absence of its own coercive apparatus (i.e., police, army, courts, prison system). One of the primary functions of the CTA is to oversee the functioning of the refugee communities in the various settlements.

### **Settlement as an Institution of Direct Democracy and Identity Construction: The Case of Lugsung Samdupling**

When the Tibetan refugees first began arriving in 1959, the Government of India turned down suggestions to keep them in homogenous units in large settlements. It also did not encourage nor request for help from the international community. The reason for this stance was that the Indian Government did not want to further attract international attention to the Tibetan crisis and invite the wrath of China. But after the 1962 war debacle and the growing problems of the refugees made the Dalai Lama think of finding some more permanent solution to the refugee problem. He again approached Nehru, who was, as usual, very accommodating. Right from the time the refugees arrived in India in 1959, Nehru was very sensitive to their needs. Nehru's political guilt was compensated by his deep personal concern for the refugees from Tibet (Norbu cited in Bernstorff and Welck 2002: 192). The responsibility of the refugees was not placed with the Home Ministry but with the Ministry of External Affairs headed by Nehru himself. Hence he could directly supervise the management and rehabilitation of refugees. So when the Dalai Lama approached Nehru for a more permanent solution to the refugee crisis, Nehru immediately agreed. He requested various State Governments to allocate extra land for the resettlement of refugees. The Government of the State of Mysore (now Karnataka) was the first to reply positively and entered into an agreement to settle 3,000 refugees on a 1,500 hectare tract of uninhabited jungle



land on a ninety nine year lease at Bylakuppe, a town in the Mysore district of Karnataka. Besides, Bylakuppe, refugees were sent to various camps in Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Tibetan refugees were rehabilitated in the settlement camps mainly in three sectors: agriculture, agro based industries, and carpet weaving and handicrafts (Kharat: 289).

Despite initial suggestions that the Tibetan refugees should be huddled together at the foothills of the Himalayas, so that they could return at the first opportunity, the Tibetan administration in exile eventually resolved in favour of more permanent rehabilitation- living in homogenous communities provided with traditional and modern educational facilities, so that “even if the struggle takes generations, new generations could replace the older ones and take on the responsibility ( Ray :88).

As of today, there are a total of fifty-eight agricultural, handicraft-based or scattered settlements of Tibetan refugees in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Each settlement is administered by a settlement officer, who in turn is guided by the CTA, the Local Tibetan Assembly and the laws of the host country. These settlements are self-sufficient with schools, monasteries and livelihood avenues for the Tibetan refugees. The core of an identity is the categorisation of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation onto the self of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Burke and Tully 1977). The aim behind relocating the refugees into these exclusive settlements was a prevention of assimilation to the country of refuge and a preservation of their Tibetan identity and culture, so that not only the current generation, but also the succeeding generations would be prepared to take on the responsibility for the Tibetan struggle.

### **Lugsung Samdrupling: An Example of Direct Democracy in Karnataka**

I will now focus on one of the oldest Tibetan settlements in India- the Lugsung Samdrupling settlement in Bylakuppe, Karnataka, South India. The erstwhile State of Mysore (now Karnataka) was the first State in India to respond to Nehru’s request to the various

States for land to build the Tibetan settlements. The State offered a 1,500 hectare tract of uninhabited jungle land on a ninety-nine year lease to settle 3,000 refugees. While the beginning was tough with Tibetans having difficulty adapting to the lower altitude, different climate, topography, and the constant threat from the large number of wild animals, with the combined efforts of the Government of Mysore, the Indian Central Government the UNHCR and the Tibetans themselves, two settlements were soon established.

The Lugsung Samdrupling settlement is the oldest Tibetan settlement in India funded by the Government of India, which was established in 1960. The settlement has thirty two villages which are called camps. The administration of the settlement is managed by a three level hierarchy of chupon, camp leader and settlement officer. All the administrative posts are democratically elected, and ultimately accountable to the CTA. The three-layer hierarchy begins with the chupon or 'head of ten' at the base. The chupon's duty is to organise labour for community projects, organise festivals and hear grievances. Above the chupon is the camp leader. The camp leader is elected for a period of years. The election of the camp leader is yet another example of direct democracy. First during each year in April, the Settlement Office sends circulars to each camp informing the people about the date time and venue of the election for that year. On the designated date, the people of the camp gather at the community hall with one box, prepared by the camp itself. In the hall, the people from the different camps who are above the age of eighteen are separated and given ballot papers. And then, after queuing up, they are requested to vote.

There are no specific predetermined candidates. Every person writes the name of any person - man or woman - who they think is capable of becoming camp leader. After all members of the camp have cast their vote, the votes are opened and the names of the four highest members are listed. The camp is then again made to choose from one of the four members. Two of the highest members are chosen as camp leader and assistant camp leader.

Direct democracy is also practiced in the way Tibetans settle their personal and civil disputes. Though there is a court set up by the

T Tibetans in the settlement, as well the Indian courts, the Tibetans almost always try to first settle their dispute at the level of the chupon. If they cannot get their grievance resolved by the chupon, they then approach the Tibetan Justice Commission set up in Bylakuppe. Before taking their case, the Justice Commission ascertains that they have tried to get their grievance resolved at the level of the chupon. The decision of the Justice Commission is final. If the matter is still not resolved the aggrieved party can approach the CTA in Dharamshala or the Indian court. Of course, in case of any criminal offense, they have to approach only the Indian court.

In 1964, the Tibetan Co-operative Society was registered under the Karnataka Co-operative Society Act. This Society is the political and economic nerve centre of the Byllakuppe settlement and its functioning is a classic example of the principle of direct democracy. Almost all the families of the settlement are represented in the cooperative. Decisions are taken collectively and profits are shared by all. The Co-operative Society of Bylakuppe, is one of the best run co-operative societies of India.

From my interviews with the officials of the settlement and my own observations, I have understood that the notion of direct democracy guides the actions of even interactions within the settlement. For a nation in exile that does not have the experience of democracy, to cultivate in exile such a high awareness of democracy, so as to practice a kind of direct democracy, can be considered an achievement.

India's policy of liberal 'non-assimilative' framework, as reflected in the separate settlements, and the broad 'delegated' authority of the Tibetan leadership headed by the Dalai Lama over the Tibetan settlement, ensures that Tibetan cultural identity and social autonomy is retained in a sea of host population. Since isolation is hardly a viable choice for most migrant communities (and individuals) when faced with the problem of adjusting in the host society, the Tibetan establishment opted for a policy of limited acculturation as opposed to assimilation (Anand 2010: 276). The pluralistic political ideology of the Indian nation state also facilitates the acceptance of Tibetans as yet another community among the diverse communities in India. 'Othering' is not just about the other but also about the self.

It allows individuals to construct sameness and difference and to affirm their own identity (Hannerz 1999). The non-assimilative policy of the Tibetans, as manifested in the functioning of the settlements, also allows them to construct and sustain their Tibetan identity.

### **Re-imagining Tibetan Nation through Collective Constructions**

Refugees, who flee, as a sign of protest at political changes and persecution in their home country, strongly believe that they share a cause with the majority of their compatriots left behind and may feel guilty for not sharing also their fate with them. This sense of guilt leads some to perceive the existence of a "historic responsibility" which is placed on them, impelling them to work for the cause and compensate for their freedom, by speaking up for those silenced at home (Kunz 1981: 45).

The Tibetan refugees, beginning with the Dalai Lama, consider this historic responsibility as the *raison d'être* of their exile. But it is not just the political 'othering' that the Tibetans protest. Their main concern has been to fight to prevent the extinction of Tibetan identity and culture. As the Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile wrote in 1995,

"Our struggle is not primarily an ethnic or political struggle...Our ultimate goal is the preservation, maintenance and dissemination of the sublime cultural traditions of the unique inner sciences for the sake of all sentient beings. However, without proper means and favourable conditions, it is not possible for us to fulfil this responsibility. We must therefore first undertake the spiritual practice of liberating Tibet without delay."

Until then, Tibet is an 'imagining community'. Especially for the Tibetan refugees, a majority of whom have never ever been to Tibet, their Tibetan identity, like any other identity, is socially, culturally and politically constructed. Though ideally Tibetans believe in themselves as one people with the single goal of freeing their homeland from oppression, Pan-Tibetanism does not really exist and the range of sects of Tibetan Buddhism, variations of the language, styles of dress and, importantly, versions of recent history, are not consistent throughout the exile community (Burke 2008: 81). Tibetan nation

currently exists only through the anticipated (re)construction of its parts: occupied country, dispersed communities and globally networked politico-cultural support system like Tibet support groups (Anand 2000: 273). Collective constructions are the joint outcome of the subjective views, perceptions and interpretations, and practical elaborations of patterns of behaviour and modes of organisation (Ben- Rafealet et al. 2006: 13). The Tibetan refugees in India, through collective constructions and diasporic consciousness, are re-imagining Tibetan identity in the Diaspora.

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