

Tibetan Nationalism and Cultural Homogenisation in Exile: An Interpretation of Institutions and the Public Sphere

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Abstract

The 20th century was the century of refugees. Several wars and territorial aggrandisement policies of nascent nation–states were responsible for the exodus of persecuted people across the world. Tibet, an isolated Himalayan nation, lost its freedom and thousands of Tibetans along with their leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, fled Tibet and took refuge in India after a long walk in the month of March 1959. The exodus has been an example not only of forced de-territorialisation of a people but also of their government. When the traditional Tibetan polity consisting of diverse cultural and regional elements came in contact with the modern democratic political institutions of the host nation–state, attempts are being made to consolidate their diverse identities through homogenising nationalistic programmes. Such attempts are fraught with multiple responses in the institutions and the public sphere among the Tibetan refugees which the article attempts to interpret.

Keywords

Nationalism, de-territorialisation, cultural homogenisation, *ethnie*, cultural nation

At a global historical juncture when the nations across the world were being consolidated and organised politically as nation–states, Tibet—an isolated Himalayan nation—was rendered stateless. It lost its territory to the invading Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) of the nascent nation–state of China in 1949/1950.

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The exodus of Tibet's spiritual and secular leader along with his government and people and attempts at transplanting and building national spiritual and secular institutions in exile constitute the background of this research article. When they came in contact with other modern nation-states, the Tibetan establishment felt a need for consolidating nationalism with the hope of regaining freedom and preparations for building the modern nation-state of Tibet. The attempts therein led to homogenisation in the socio-cultural sphere which has seen approval and disapproval and consensus and conflict in the institutions and the public sphere. In the wake of prolonged refugee status and changed international geo-politics the Tibetan case of nationalism offers a different model which helps to rearticulate the Eurocentric/First World Centric notions of nationalism and nation-building. Given that nationalism is often, though not always, a prerequisite to nation formation, a study of nationalism of an exile community throws light on the inter-connections between nationalism and cultural homogenisation. On the basis of interpretations of field data collected from the Tibetan settlements in the Himalayan region of North India as well as agrarian settlements of South India during our episodic field work from 2016 to 2019, this article provides a nuanced understanding of Tibetan nationalism in exile.

De-Territorialisation and the Making of the Tibetan Refugee

The terms de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation were first used by Deleuze and Guattari (2013) in their analysis of capitalism, power and identity. For the geographer Warf (2010, p. 722), these processes are spatial manifestations of contemporary changes under way in the relationship between social life and its territorial moorings. Subsequently, these terms have been adopted in other social sciences and humanities. The terms have been employed to explain the nature of transformations in the modern social and geo-political space. Giddens (1990), for example, considered de-territorialisation as a central feature of globalisation. It implied the growing presence of social forms of contact and involvement which go beyond the limits of a specific territory. In this article, we have used the term political de-territorialisation to refer to the process whereby Tibetans were forced to flee their territory en masse and establish their nation sans territory in India when China occupied Tibet in 1949/1950.

The centuries old dispute between China and Tibet over the political status of Tibet took an aggressive turn in 1949, when the PLA of China occupied Tibet in what it called an attempt to liberate Tibetans from the despotism of the Tibetan aristocracy, and reunite the territory with the motherland. After nine years of fruitless attempts at negotiations between the Governments of China and Tibet, in March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the XIV Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled Tibet to take refuge in India. To escape the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution that took place in China and China-occupied Tibet from 1966 to 1976, thousands of Tibetans fled to India as refugees. Such a diasporic movement continued even until the last decade of the 20th century, of course, with lesser magnitude.

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. The Dalai Lama soon after reaching India got on with the task of creation and sustenance of unified Tibetan community with the support of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), International aid and the cooperation of the Indian government and people. Pre-modern Tibet did not constitute a homogenous political system. Apart from the centralised structures of political power in the cities and main monasteries, there were regional federations of varying degree of internal loyalties and semi-autonomous administrative units (von Bruck, 2004, p. 11). Almost completely detached from all of that were the nomads, who lived in the extensive plains in a pre-national culture in which the religious significance of higher lamas and especially that of the Dalai Lama, was recognised but was not accorded any political authority (ibid., p. 12). However, though disparate, Tibetans, over the centuries never doubted that they constitute one cultural entity. They were identifiable with some cultural commonality shared across the three regions of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo which were believed to constitute Tibet. In the political sociological parlance, they can be conceived as an *ethnie*, if not a nation. Commenting on Tibet's independent status, the 14th Dalai Lama himself said:

The Chinese government wants me to say that for centuries Tibet has been part of China. Even if I make that statement, many people would just laugh. And my statement will not change past history. History is history. (Liu, 2008)

Examination of the historical political relations between Tibet and China are beyond the scope of this article. We are interested in knowing the political sociological features of Tibet in history. Such an exploration will help us in understanding Tibet as a cultural nation. The next section attempts at a conceptual clarification of 'cultural *ethnie*' and 'political nation' with an aim to understand the features of Tibet as a political entity.

The Development of the Tibetan *Ethnie* and Formation of a Cultural Nation

Like the beginnings of any other social institution, there is no consensus among scholars about the origins of nations—modern or ancient. While scholars like Armstrong (1982) posit that nations have ancient origins, others like Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1983) argue that nations can only be associated with modernity. In the arguments of Smith (1991) we find a way out of this divide by his 'ethno-symbolic' approach wherein he makes a distinction between cultural *ethnie* and political nation. Smith (1991, p. 25) explores the origins of nations and national identity. He conceives ethnic identity as a pre-modern form of collective cultural identity and traces the formation of national identity and nations in it. Such human populations are *ethnies* which are, 'named human populations with shared ancestry, myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a

specific territory and a sense of solidarity' (Smith, 1986, p. 32). Informed by the ethno-symbolic approach, we have attempted to understand the political, cultural, religious and social affiliations in pre-modern Tibet.

Tibet had never been one homogenous monolithic state in history. There is no consensus on what constitutes Tibet even to this day. Such an ambiguity is one of the core issues governing the China–Tibet stand-off. Officially China claims that Tibet today refers only to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). For the Tibetans living in exile, and for most of the outside world, Tibet also includes within its ambit all other regions where ethnic Tibetans have been residing for centuries. Ethnically, Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo have been administratively re-aligned by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in parts of Qinghai, northern and western Sichuan, the southwest portion of Gansu and the northwest corner of Yunnan.

The focal theoretical task of an ethno-symbolic analysis is to provide a cultural history of the nation as a type of historical culture community (Smith, 2009, p. 39). By this, Smith meant an enquiry into the successive social and cultural self-images and sense of identity, the ideological conflicts and the social changes of a culturally defined population in a given area and/or polity. Smith (2009, p. 36) defines an *ethnie* as 'a named and self-defined human community whose members possess a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of common culture, including a link with a territory, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the upper strata'. Before China's occupation of Lhasa, Tibetans inhabited huge geographical area sharing a common language with dialectal differences and a common religion with sectarian differences. There was a wide variety of political and social formations across the Tibetan plateau. Central Tibet was under one uniform rule from the time of recorded history until the 20th century. However, areas adjacent to central Tibet, especially Kham and Amdo, have been governed by a series of small lay and monastic chieftains, and some areas have even been under varying degrees of Chinese control. Nonetheless, they constituted a national community. Accordingly, despite the heterogeneity of its political history, the Tibetan *ethnie* was developed and nurtured on account of some cultural commonalities. Culturally, Tibet has been distinguished by the use of classical Tibetan as a literary medium for religious texts, by shared dramatic and artistic performances, common craft traditions and by the pre-eminent role of Tibetan Buddhism in individual and community life. The administrative and political boundaries were subordinate to religious and cultural practices of the people. For Dreyfus (2002) pre-modern Tibet could be understood as a semi-bureaucratic state, one in which the inequalities in bureaucratic administration across Tibetan territory are 'typical of any pre-modern state, which is defined not by boundaries but by a complicated network of overlapping allegiances'. For pre-modern Tibet, what mattered was not where or if lines were drawn on a map, but the sentiments and allegiances of people and communities to the central state (McGranahan, 2010, p. 41). Anand (2007, p. 92) argues that western-oriented analyses often fail to transcend the belief in the separation of the sacral and the temporal that lies at the base of Enlightenment thinking and informs most scholarly endeavours. The Tibetan concept of *chos-srid-gnyis* (dual religious and

secular system of government) cannot be explained by any Western model of governance. Though the Dalai Lama's political control was only limited to Central Tibet, the Lamaist State exercised tremendous non-political influence over the so-called ethnographic Tibet.

Thus, despite the fluidity of multiple rulers and political fragmentation, ethnographic Tibet nevertheless evolved through the centuries as one ethnic community. The strength of the *ethnie* was in fact so strong that ethnographic Tibet was able to withstand not only the Chinese onslaught and active attempts to Sinocise Tibetans, but also the challenges of life in exile. So, irrespective of the ambiguity concerning the political status of Tibet prior to Chinese occupation/liberation, Tibet could be considered a cultural nation ever since recorded history. The distinction between political nation (*Staatsnation*) and cultural nation (*Kulturnation*), given by Meinecke (quoted in Alter 1989, 8) is useful to understand the attempts made by the Tibetan refugees in India to sustain the Tibetan nation in exile after the Chinese occupation.

Nationalism and Construction of Tibetan Nationalism in Exile

Nationalism is not easy to define or explain as it rests on the problematical idea of 'nation', a term that, like its derivative, is easier to identify when encountered than to define in the abstract (Alter, 1989, p. 417). In the latter part of the 20th century, a number of scholars (Anderson, 1983; Deutsch, 1966; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990) examined the concept nation. In this article we have conceptualised nation as a political entity that comes into existence when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation and emotionally identify with a given piece of territory. We have adopted a constructivist perspective on nation. Following Gellner (1983), constructivists believe that nations are constructs, contingent and deliberately created by various elites. We consider the Tibetan nation as constructed in the Tibetan governmental establishment in exile.

Nationalism is an ideology that stresses allegiance to one's nation as a major political virtue and national preservation and self-determination as prime political imperatives (Kane 2016). Hobsbawm (1990, pp. 9–13) argues: 'for the purposes of analysis, nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round'. In Gellner's view (1983, p. 7) people belong to the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, and if and only if they recognise each other as belonging to the same nation. It can only be realised prospectively after its members develop a sense of nationalism. In this sense, a strong sense of nationalism precedes the formation of a nation.

There is often an intrinsic connection between nationalism and exile though they seem to be polar opposites as the former is defined by its sense of belonging to a specific geographic area, and the latter is characterised by a constant discontinuous sense of being. But all nationalisms, especially in their early stages, develop from a condition of estrangement (Said, 2000, p. 141). Because they do not have a state, they feel an urgent need to reconstitute broken lives usually by

choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology of a restored people (*ibid.*, p. 142). The Tibetan refugees in India are a classic example of how nationalism is created and sustained in exile in the absence of a legitimate state. Of the millions that have fled their homeland seeking refuge and a new life in host societies, the Tibetans stand apart. They have taken refuge not as individuals, but rather as a national polity that has escaped the invasion, atrocities and devastation taking place in Tibet following China's Cultural Revolution. Both the people and their cultural institutions have taken refuge in a host setting and have demonstrated both strength and survivability (Michael, 1985, p. 737).

Soon after coming into exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama got on with the task of creation and sustenance of unified Tibetan community with the support of international aid and the cooperation of the Indian Government and people. On 29 April 1959, the Dalai Lama reconstituted the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE). Later known as Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the TGiE claimed to be a continuation of the Government in pre-exile Tibet. However, in keeping with the civic nationalism of modern societies where no one strata of society is privileged, the members of the TGiE came from different social classes unlike aristocratic composition of the Tibetan government prior to exile. The Dalai Lama and the TGiE soon began to consciously construct a Tibetan community in exile. We call it an enterprise in building 'a unified national community' which has to be collectively constructed in the face of disparity that existed in the traditional theocratic Tibetan state. As is well known, by this time, states had already been imagined and constructed as nation-states in the West and the de-colonised nations had become nation-states. The citizens of other nation-states of the world could concretise the abstract idea of their respective nation-states with rather ease because of their rootedness in their territory. The de-territorialised Tibetans have had to construct their nation-state in an alien land. In order to create and sustain their Tibetanness (the idea of belonging to Tibet)¹ in exile, the socio-political practices of the Tibetans in India are guided by a 'non-assimilative ideology'. In consonance with this ideology, the establishment of liberal 'non-assimilative' Tibetan settlements is one of the key factors facilitating preserving Tibetan cultural identity and social autonomy despite living for over sixty years in an alien land.

Towards Constructing Tibetan Identity in Exile

As a background to the interpretation of the process of homogenisation with nationalistic goals, we will first discuss the content of the elite driven Tibetan nationalism in exile. Some scholars like Lopez (1999) attribute the emergence of Tibetan nationalism to Tibetan contact with the West since coming into exile. They opine that Tibetan nationalism is modelled keeping in mind the orientalist fixation that the West has with Tibet and Tibetans.

The experiences in diaspora provided the stimulus for modern Tibetan identity construction. Prior to 1959, the elites, while vaguely knowing that they shared some cultural moorings were not aware of being a nation. A sense of Tibetan nationalism developed only in exile when the Tibetan exile elite encountered the

West's oriental perspective on Tibet (Lopez, 1999). But this gaze at least as it was represented to the West, saw the Land of Snows only as it was reflected in the elaborately framed mirror of Western fantasies about Tibet (Lopez, 1999). Dreyfus (2002) does not agree with Lopez's claim that Tibetan nationalism emerged only when the Tibetans, wanting to represent themselves to the West, used Western orientalist vocabulary to define the Tibetan nation and Tibetan nationalism. Though he admitted that there was no full-fledged Tibetan nationalism prior to coming into exile, following Hobsbawm (1990), he opines that there existed in pre-modern Tibet a sense of proto-nationalism—an awareness of common cultural identity. He believes that this proto-nationalism got clearly defined in the 1950s with de-territorialisation. Such nationalism has been specifically religious in nature. Instead of using the secular discourse usually associated with modern nationalism, this brand of nationalism defines the Tibetan nation by using traditional Buddhist values such as compassion and *karma*, and the bond between Tibetans and Avalokiteśvara (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 12). However, the nation thus defined is not the traditional Tibet with its diversity of local cultural, social and political communities, but a modern country united by its opposition to the Chinese (*ibid.*, p. 12). Dreyfus (2002) cites the example of the anthems used by Tibetans in exile to signify the religious nature of Tibetan nationalism. In the 1960s, exiled Tibetans used their own traditional discourse to represent themselves as belonging to an independent country defined by its Buddhist values, by its relation with Avalokiteśvara and by its opposition to the Chinese occupation (*ibid.*, p. 14). Dreyfus also elaborates that the exiled Tibetans' encounter with India made them incorporate human rights and democracy as their national values as enshrined in their Constitution that was drawn up in exile.

The Tibetan nationalism which already had its origins as proto-nationalism of the Tibetan *ethnie* was religious in nature and suffused with religious symbolism. This religious nationalism also marked the commemoration of secular events in exile, like the Tibetan Uprising day on March 10. Exposed to Indian democracy, the Tibetan exile elite have included secular values like human rights and democracy as added components of Tibetan nationalism. Contact with the West made the Tibetans embrace other secular options like non-violence, peace and environmental consciousness into the ambit of Tibetan nationalism. Of course, the key figure around which Tibetan nationalism revolves is the person and institution of the Dalai Lama. And though he has given up his political leadership in 2011, he remains the pre-eminent symbol of Tibetan nationalism.

The Tibetan nation currently exists only through the anticipated (re)construction of its parts: occupied country, dispersed communities and globally networked politico-cultural support system such as Tibet support groups (Venturino, 1997, p. 103). The efforts of the creation of the Tibetan national community in-exile illustrates the successful strategies of the Dalai Lama-led government to foster and maintain a distinctive national identity among disparate groups of people from various parts of greater Tibet with a mix of religious, cultural and political elements.

In the absence of political control on the territory to which their nation is confined, the leaders of the Tibetan nation attempt at fostering a unified homogenised Tibetan identity and political praxis that follows we call cultural

homogenisation. Nationalism is a phenomenon that creates or presupposes cultural homogeneity (Helbling 2013). Conversi (2007) views homogenisation as an elite-driven attempt to impose socio-cultural changes leading to, or aiming at, cultural uniformity. Homogenisation in the case of Tibetans is cultural because in the absence of concrete political territory the oneness of Tibetan nation is projected through cultural symbols. We will now consider the processes of homogenisation in secular and monastic institutions and the responses of the Tibetan exile community to these nationalistic processes.

A breakdown of the normal normative order is a basic accompaniment of exodus. Abrupt dismantling of all institutions is an unintended consequence of exodus. In this specific instance of the exodus of Tibetans from Tibet, not only the abstract normative order was dismantled but the concrete institutional structures were also destroyed and the leaders and the masses were terrorised. Rebuilding institutions in exile was recognised as necessary for the survival of the centuries old culture and uphold it for posterity.

Given the hegemony of Tibetan Buddhism and the exalted religious as well as secular positions of the Dalai Lama for centuries, Tibetan nationalism even in exile is suffused with religion. Religion, then, is not just a doctrine, a set of myths or a culture; it is an institutional space according to whose logic religious nationalists wish to remake the world (Friedland, 2001, p. 141). Religion is a network of sacred sites and ritual spaces, as well as community centres, associations, schools, hospitals, courts and charities (ibid). Thus, most social institutions that have been established by Tibetans in exile have some connection with religion. Given the pre-eminence of religion in defining Tibetan nationalism, but even Tibetan identity in exile.

Contextual Understanding of Pre-Eminence of Tibetan Buddhist Institutions

While the idea of Tibet being an idyllic religious Shangri-La in pre-modern times has been proved to be a figment of Western imagination and Occidental Orientalism, what is undisputable is that ever since the 7th century at least religion—specifically Tibetan Buddhism—played a pivotal role in defining the socio-political and cultural landscape of Tibet. Until the Chinese occupation, the monastic institutions, headed by the Dalai Lama played a paramount role in political and public life. The Chinese occupation of Tibet and the subsequent alleged attempts at Sinicisation have had its worst toll on the monasteries and nunneries. Tibetan monasteries and nunneries have been the centre of protest against Chinese excesses. The persecution was most acute during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s where a number of monasteries were destroyed and monks and nuns tortured, jailed and forced into hard labour and even disrobe. Consequently, a large number of monks and nuns have had to flee into exile. In exile the monks re-established their monasteries. Additionally, nunneries were also established for the nuns. Today, there are known to be 4,153 Tibetan monasteries and nunneries with 35,327 monks and nuns of different traditions in India, Nepal and Bhutan.²

In exile, the symbolic power of the institution of religion, the influence of religious specialists, and composition of the laity have all undergone transformations.

For Bourdieu (1991, p. 2) religion as a symbolic system is simultaneously 'structured and structuring'. Not only does it contribute to continuity and change in socio-cultural practices, the institution of religion itself undergoes transformations as per the contexts in which it is practiced. Bourdieu (1991) saw religion as having its own relatively autonomous field, which was fluid and dynamic. Buddhism as practiced by the Tibetans living in India is not a simple extension of the Tibetan Buddhist institutions in pre-1959 Tibet.

The sectarian divisions and animosity that dominated premodern Tibet also did not immediately disappear in exile. However, due to the efforts of the Dalai Lama, whose spiritual and temporal importance became a homogenising fulcrum of Tibetan nationalism in exile, these sectarian hostilities got significantly watered down. One important observation made by Kolas (1996, p. 59) in comparing religious institutional practices in Tibet and in exile is that in Tibet various religious art and symbols in monasteries as well as religious practices and teaching were not perceived as being 'Tibetan' but rather as being part of Buddha's teaching. Maintaining and recreating a Tibetan identity in exile involves a self-conscious display of Tibetan Buddhist religion and an organised recreation of Tibetan culture. Publicly enacted religious expressions enhance feelings of a common purpose within the Tibetan community (ibid). These religious symbols and motifs are not just confined to religious institutions, but are suffused even in the secular domain where they come to symbolise Tibetan national identity.

The monastic institutions set up in exile have no doubt been an important source of reinstating the cultural institutions left behind in Tibet. At the same time, they have led to cultural changes not only among the Tibetan exile community but also in the host society. As Klieger (1991) argues, Tibetans have successfully invoked a traditional *chos-yon* (priest-patron relationship) in the modern exile setting by capitalising on the West's fascination with Tibetan Buddhism. Western donors are some of the biggest funders of Tibetan religious institutions in exile. The donors from the West equate financial support to monasteries with preservation of Tibetan culture. In requesting for donations, many Tibetan monasteries also convey through their appeals for financial support that in turn help them preserve Tibetan culture. Thus, making Tibetan Buddhism an integral component of Tibetan nationalism in exile also has the latent function of attracting foreign funding for the maintenance and upkeep of religious institutions.

Education and Nationalism in Exile

Despite the prevalence of schools in Tibet since the 7th century, not many attended schools and there were a few people who were really educated. The 13th Dalai Lama did try to introduce modern education. He even sent students to study in England because during his exile to India he saw and appreciated the British school system and the democratic system. Unfortunately, at that time such elites as the monastery authority, the aristocrats and the higher families opposed these changes. And by 1951, a major disruption was brought to modernisation of education by the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

One of the most important priorities initiated by the Indian Prime Minister Pandit Nehru, the Dalai Lama and the CTA after coming into exile has been the setting up of educational institutions for the children of Tibetan refugees. The Dalai Lama recognised the shortcomings in the field of education in Tibet before exile. Immediately after settling in exile, he requested Pandit Nehru to provide for the education of Tibetan children. Pandit Nehru suggested that the Tibetan children could enrol in the various Central schools set up in India. However, in keeping with the non-assimilative framework of the Dalai Lama and the CTA, His Holiness felt that if young Tibetans joined Indian schools, it would not help the preservation of Tibetan culture. So, he requested Pandit Nehru to set up separate schools for Tibetans. The idea behind establishing separate schools for Tibetans in India was two-fold: provision of quality modern education and preservation of the Tibetan language and culture. Accordingly, four types of schools were set up for Tibetans in exile—Central Schools run by Tibetan Administration (twenty-eight schools), Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV, eighteen schools), Tibetan Homes Foundation (three schools), Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society (twelve schools) in India and Snow Lion Foundation (twelve schools) in Nepal. With the drastic drop in the number of Tibetans coming from Tibet and a sharp increase in the number of Tibetans migrating outside India, all Tibetan schools face the problem of shortage of students. But of all the Tibetan schools in India TCV has the highest general enrolment rate. We have focussed on how TCV through its curricula and teaching pattern help in the sustenance of a unified homogenous Tibetan nationalism in exile.

Tibetan Children's Village (TCV)

The Tibetan Children's Village was started by Ms. Tsering Dolma, the Dalai Lama's sister, in 1960 at the request of the Dalai Lama. It was originally meant to be a temporary nursery for the orphaned and poor refugee children. TCV grew over the years and today almost one-third of the Tibetan population, including children coming from Tibet have gone through the TCV system of education.

As more and more Tibetans now migrate to Western countries for better prospects, their financial stability increases but there are fears of immigration giving rise to a degeneration of 'Tibetanness' as the Director of TCV calls it. To address this apprehension of decreasing Tibetanness among the Tibetans living in the West, the TCV branch at Dal Lake in Dhramshala has Summer Camps where Tibetan students from the US, Europe, Canada and Australia spend six weeks learning Tibetan language, culture, history and music. TCV also encourages Tibetan parents living in the West to send their children to TCV for their school education so that Tibetan language and culture are nurtured when they go back to their homes in the West for higher studies.

Pattern of the Curricula

Until the 1980s, the TCV followed the National Council of Educational and Research Training (NCERT) syllabus. But as one of the main aims of TCV has been the inculcation of a sense of Tibetan cultural identity among its students in

addition to providing modern education, in the 1980s it was decided that in order to familiarise Tibetan students with the language, culture, history and topography of Tibet, the school curricula should be suitably modified. Accordingly, in early 1982–1983, TCV gradually prepared its own curricula until class five. This was done through what was known as the Tibetanisation project.

Apart from preparing textbooks to suit the new curricula which now included Tibetan culture, history, geography, arts and so on and ensuring a change in medium of instruction, TCV had to also facilitate the teachers to undergo training to teach the modified syllabus. TCV felt that while the Teacher's training courses offered in various Indian colleges would focus on the methodology or psychology of curriculum development, it may not be helpful in instilling confidence in the Tibetan teachers to teach the subject matter in Tibetan. Hence, TCV developed its own teacher's training college in Tibetan language, along with developing curriculum and textbooks.

Besides the curricula, a sense of Tibetanness is also instilled in the students through various co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. For instance, each TCV school dedicates a whole month in an academic year to a project titled 'Tibet: My Country'. Each class is given a specific theme related to Tibetan culture, religion, history and custom. Such projects create awareness among Tibetans born and brought up in exile about aspects of Tibet's land, flora and fauna—the Tibet that neither they nor even their parents may have ever been to. It also helps create a sense of unity among the heterogeneous Tibetan populace.

With regard to language, while the written language and script are standardised, the dialects used in TCVs depend on the specific teacher; if the teacher is from Kham for instance, the teacher will use the Khampa dialect. The dialect followed in the schools is a mixture of different regions, though it most closely follows the Lhasa dialect. The focus of all Tibetan schools is on promoting a homogenous Tibetan identity while providing quality education to the Tibetan students in exile. As observed by us in the field, the parents of Tibetan children attending Tibetan schools came from different regions of Tibet. A number of students also directly come from Tibet to learn more about Tibetan culture and identity in exile schools, for such education is seldom allowed in China occupied Tibet. Despite huge risks involved in border crossing, Tibetan parents still send their children to Tibetan schools in exile as they feel that in Tibet education is Sinocised. The Tibetan schools in exile, in turn give a lot of emphasis to sustaining Tibetan national identity in exile, albeit the nationalism nurtured in the Tibetan schools is elite-driven nationalism created and sustained by the exile administration. It has the latent consequence of instilling cultural homogenisation among students who come from diverse regional backgrounds.

Post-1959, traditional institutions in Tibet proper have weathered many storms. They have been either bent or destroyed, and at times they have been maintained only at a superficial level. The only hope for the preservation of these Tibetan institutions has been in exile where they have been consciously nurtured by the Tibetan exile administration. The Tibetan institutions in exile also play a crucial role in cultivating Tibetan nationalism. Yet one thing has remained constant—the pervasive influence of religion on Tibetan society. Religious nationalism is not alien to the formation of the

modern nation-state also (Friedland, 2001, p. 129). Even a cursory look suggests that the formation of many non-Western modern national identities and nationalist movements were suffused with religious narrative and myth, symbolism and ritual—Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine, to take just a few examples (*ibid.*). Tibetan nationalism too is infused with religion; other institutions in exile too are shaped by religion, in some way or the other.

Influence of Exile Nationalism in China-Occupied Tibet

China has always considered itself more of a civilisation state rather than a nation state. Chinese historians generally describe the process of Chinese territorial expansion as one of ‘unification’ rather than ‘conquest’, with expansion being seen as a progressive evolution towards a preordained and inevitable unity (Jacques, 2009, p. 237). Han Chinese hegemonism and expansionism in Tibet has submerged Tibetan national identity within the larger nationalism of a unified Chinese motherland. Yet Tibetans in Tibet are getting increasingly frustrated with the suppression of their religious expression. Tibetans wishing to assert their ethnic nationalism often have to escape to exile. Contact between exiled and homeland Tibetans in the last few decades, either in the form of travel or via the media, has led to strengthening ethnic nationalism in Tibet. Despite China’s best efforts, the Dalai Lama is emerging as a powerful symbol of Tibetan nationalism even in Tibet. As expressed by a young Lhasa monk in 1992: ‘The Chinese have Mao, we have the Dalai Lama’ (Kolas, 1996, p. 57).

However, the authoritative Chinese regime and the lack of leadership in Tibet, means that Tibetan nationalism optimally is a type of long-distance nationalism operating from exile. There is a yawning gap between the life worlds and socio-political realities of the exiled Tibetans and Tibetans in Tibet paradoxically in an era of nationalist struggle for self-determination, a history of exile implies inclusion (Misra, 2003, p. 204). Indeed, there exists very little admiration among the diasporic community for those who decide to stay, fight and die inglorious deaths (*ibid.*). Given China’s clout in today’s world order, and its iron grip over Tibet, Tibetan nationalism is best articulated only in exile.

Responses to Cultural Homogenisation

The vision of nationalism, spearheaded by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile establishment has been adopted by most Tibetans, but not all. Tibetan nationalism is not a unified discourse, but a site of contention, where conflicting visions compete for the allegiance of Tibetans (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 13). There are many Tibetan nationalists, both inside and outside of Tibet, who are markedly uncomfortable with religious nationalism and who feel ill at ease to self-identify with the moral community defined by the ‘Prayer of Truthful Words’ and the National Anthem (*ibid.*). Those who put forth an alternative nationalism sometimes see religion at odds with democratic politics. There are others who blame the dominance of Tibetan Buddhism with its orthodoxy and insistence on non-violence for the fall of Tibet.

In exile, the creation and sustenance of nationalism requires the conscious adoption of some identities and more emphasis on some national traits than others. Tibetan society has always been deeply influenced by sectarian and regional differences. A homogenous and hegemonic Lhasa-centred identity critiques regional and sectarian identities as backward, divisive and harmful to the Tibetan Cause (McGranahan, 2010, p. 17). Favoured are central Tibetan styles of language and dress, general senses of propriety and demeanour and ideas of class, hierarchy, and prestige directly correlated to central Tibetan socio-political world (ibid.). Tibetan institutions such as religion and education conform to this elite-driven homogeneous national identity. A monk who escaped from Kham in Tibet 15 years ago shared with us that today when he speaks to his mother who is still in Kham, they are not mutually comprehensible as he has forgotten his original Khampa dialect and his mother cannot comprehend the central Tibetan variant that he has learnt in the monastery in exile. A number of Tibetans also informed us that the spoken Tibetan in exile is not purely Lhasa Tibetan, but a variety though influenced strongly by Lhasa Tibetan, has nonetheless organically grown in exile. This standardised variety of spoken Tibetan, colloquially referred to as *Ukhey*, has helped unite and homogenise the different dialects spoken in exile. Consequently, a number of older Tibetans in exile complain that their regional dialects are being lost as youngsters and their households tend to favour the standard variety taught in school.

Among the Tibetan exile community, Tibetan nationalism constructed in exile recently has been influenced by the Western appeal for the base of their financial support as well as international recognition in the Western countries. Tibet proper has been portrayed as a Shangri-La—a peaceful land with religious and non-violent happy and simple people. In an attempt to cultivate this image, Tibetan society, at times, glosses over its violent past, especially the recent ones. One casualty of these conscious efforts among Tibetans at portraying a homogenous identity is the Chushi Gandruk³ organisation. Though it has played a pivotal role in the Tibetan movement and in getting the Dalai Lama safely to India, the contribution of this resistance army has often been glossed over, in an attempt to portray the Tibetan movement as being nonviolent.

In recent years, the Tibetan public sphere has been witnessing a challenge to the homogenisation of Tibetan nationalism. The question of *Ranzen* (freedom) versus *Umeylam* (the middle road) is discussed in some detail given its potential to even disrupt the Tibetan unity in exile.

Ranzen Versus Umeylam

Despite the Chinese occupation for more than sixty years, the aspiration for freedom is very strong among the Tibetans. In the 1980s, this aspiration took on a new dimension with the Dalai Lama's proposal of giving up the demand of independence in lieu of genuine autonomy. Acknowledging that historical changes required for independence may take longer time and by that time irreversible changes may take place in Tibetan geography and culture, the Dalai Lama proposed this approach that he labelled the Middle Way approach. The Middle Way approach seeks a resolution of the Tibetan issue within the framework of the

Chinese constitution. Many international leaders supported this political transition and with the Dalai Lama's encouragement the CTA as well as most Tibetans in exile now support the Middle Way.

Yet given the emergence of democratic ideas in exile, a number of individuals did raise their objection to the 'Middle Way Approach'. But the larger Tibetan community was upset that people were questioning the decision of the Dalai Lama. A number of people we met mentioned that they agreed with the Middle Way Approach as it was formulated by the Dalai Lama, and they felt that he knew what was best for the community and country.⁴ The proponents of *Ranzen* are at times even branded as traitors. Tenzin Tsundue, a noted Tibetan activist poet and an advocate of *Ranzen* explains this antagonism towards those who propose independence.

It is all about the combination of political reasoning and religious faith. When you have a leader, who is Buddha then no reasoning can stand in front of him. Because the whole idea of genuine autonomy came from the Dalai Lama, people are asking that if Dalai Lama feels that autonomy is the best policy for Tibet then why people even find it necessary to even consider another policy. So, this destroys the very fabric of democracy or reasoning or individual thinking. That I think is the question, it is never about autonomy, the validity about autonomy or freedom ... it is never about these things.

The Dalai Lama's standing as *Chenrezig* (Buddha of Compassion) makes any criticism of him, however minor, elicits widespread social ostracism. Supporters of *Ranzen* are routinely attacked, at times even physically, and on occasions even hounded out of India for being 'anti Dalai Lama'. The strong reactions to the debate over *Umelaym* and *Ranzen* in the public sphere highlight the complexities and fragilities of sustaining democracy in exile. At the beginning of exile, diverse identities are sought to be united through nationalistic homogenising practices. But over a period of time, empowered and strengthened by the various institutions in exile, refugees developed reasoning which facilitated them to protest attempts at cultural homogenisation.

Conclusion

Given the hegemonising influence of globalisation, some scholars like Kenichi Ohmae (1995) predict the end of the nation state because it is no longer the optimal unit for organising economic activity. However, others like Walby (2003) opine that the demise of the nation state cannot be predicted when its very existence itself is more of a myth. The notion that there have been neatly bounded societies—where economic, political and cultural domains or levels map neatly onto to each other—is inadequate (Walby, 2003, p. 530). These arguments notwithstanding, in this article we have sought to depict how Tibetans in exile, despite the odds stacked against them, still nurture a dream of a Tibetan nation-state and thus refrain from taking Indian citizenship and assimilating in the host country.

Reconstituting community in a time of national trauma and in new and scattered locales is never an easy or singular task (McGranahan, 2010, p. 16). A homogenised

ethnic Tibetan nationalism in exile is cultivated at the expense of identities based on regional and sectarian affiliations (*ibid*). What happens when society is subjected to the supposedly opposing pulls of nationalism and individualism in a group that was never open to the external influences until recently has been dealt with in this article. An understanding of Tibetan nationalism and nation-building in exile needs to take into account the blending of novel modern secular democratic processes of civic nationalism with the continuing religious and cultural practices of ethnic nationalism. Perhaps a Constitutional patriotism, as suggested by Habermas (1996)—whereby the heterogeneity of the Tibetan exile population would not deter from the political goal of the Tibetan movement—would check the challenge of the fragmentation of Tibetan exile community caused by a dependence on ethnic nationalism.

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Notes

1. Like any other identity displaying term ‘Tibetanness’ too is evasive. It is an abstract cultural identity each Tibetan socialises into which is best illustrated by a verse composed by Tsundue (2017, p. 13):
‘I am Tibetan.
But I am not from Tibet.
Never been there.
Yet I dream
of dying there.’
2. This information has been collected from the website www.tibetfoundation.org. Established in the year 1985, Tibet Foundation is one among several organisations that work for the understanding and betterment of conditions of Tibet and Tibetans.
3. The Chushi Gandruk was an organisation of Tibetan guerrilla fighters formally created on 16 June 1958 which had been fighting the forces of the PLA since 1956. Their major

success was the safe escorting of the Dalai Lama from Lhasa to India when he fled Tibet in March 1959 (Gyatso, 1998).

4. Even the Tibetan Muslims and the practitioners of pre-Buddhist Bon religion of Tibet whom we interviewed have told us that they respect the institution and authority of the Dalai Lama.

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