



Upholding the Voice of Tibet: Efforts for Preservation of Tibetan Language and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Since the Chinese occupation of 1959, Tibetans have endured years of displacement, and have been forced to migrate to different countries, particularly in South Asian countries like India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Forced to live in a culturally different space, Tibetans have often expressed concern over a possible erosion of their linguistic heritage and cultural identity. This study primarily uses a qualitative approach involving the use of both primary and secondary sources to examine the repercussions of Tibet's occupation and their relocation on their lives at present, both in terms of identity and language preservation. The findings of this study illustrates that while the first-generation immigrants only spoke Tibetan, the second generation of Tibetans, despite the migration, were fairly proficient in Tibetan language, particularly in its spoken form, due to consistent interactions in their native language at home. However, upon relocation, the second and third generation Tibetans were often forced to inculcate second and third languages, such as Hindi and English, both as principal mediums of education due to demands of a globalized market. The adaptation of culturally unfamiliar languages was described to have created significant anxieties and insecurities among the community regarding the possible loss and replacement of their cultural identity. Through an exploration of local, national and international language preservation efforts, this paper aims to provide a phenomenological interpretation of language conservation and preservation among Tibetans.

Keywords: *Migration; Language Preservation; Tibetan Language; Intergenerational Changes; Cultural Assimilation*

Introduction

Tibet, popularly known as the 'roof of the world' (Thompson, 2008) occupies a vast area of the plateaus and mountains in Central Asia and has been at the centre of numerous geopolitical, diplomatic, environmental, and human rights discussions. The recorded history of Tibet dates back centuries, and has

enriching accounts of dynastic power, invasions, and the gradual evolution to what Tibet is considered to be today. Originally, Tibetan society was organised along a medieval feudalistic pattern. (Saklani, 1978) Social classes among the Tibetans were defined as noble versus peasant, merchant versus labourer, cleric versus layman, agriculturalist versus nomad, and so on. The peasants worked as tenants or agricultural labourers on land owned by the nobility or monasteries. Due to Tibet's high altitude and cold climate, many led a nomadic or pastoral self-sustaining lifestyle. (Miller, 2000)

Lifestyle, language, festivals, their spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, and Buddhism together form a central component of Tibetan history and culture. The original Tibetan script consisting of thirty-four letters, thirty consonants, and four vowels was developed to facilitate the translation of ancient Buddhist texts into Tibetan; until then, texts were memorized and transmitted orally. (Banerjee, 1981) Language therefore holds importance not only for communication but also as the principal medium for preserving sacred texts and community history. However, during the late 1950s, Tibetans were uprooted from their physical roots. The Chinese invasion of 1959 resulted in Tibetan people losing not just their land, but also their material culture in terms of clothing, food, and handicrafts, and their overall cultural existence as a community. Additionally, China imposed their language as the principle medium of education, forcing Tibetans to learn Mandarin and relegate their native language to a second language, rarely taught in schools and mostly limited to conversations in individual homes.

The grief associated with uprooting is something many immigrants are familiar with—the differences between “here” and “back there”, between the instinct to ‘fit in’, to survive and the yearning to preserve parts of their culture, language, social life, and in the process their idea of themselves. The idea of a ‘home’ includes a multitude of aspects— the smells, the sounds, the jokes, the people, something in the native tongue that cannot be translated. That loss and longing is difficult to replace irrespective of how safe or happy a life one may be living somewhere else. (Gupta, 2022) In this regard, language becomes a critical aspect of one's cultural origin and identity.

Language determines the understanding of people's culture in our world. It extends beyond mere sentence structure and grammar, and language encapsulates history, discourse, customs, and heritage. (Rogers, 2020) Both written and spoken words serve as a form for the transmission of values and traditions across generations. When an individual communicates in a particular language, they reflect their nationality, origin, ethnicity, and culture, and provides the speaker with the opportunity to express cultural identities and create bonds over shared ones. In this way, language often becomes a medium for cultural exchange and bonding between members of a community. Social interactions through the use of a particular language also facilitates individuals to become aware of the culture surrounding the language. Language, therefore, is intertwined with every aspect of a culture. Whether it be through the name of a dish, to naming a child, or the translation of sacred texts— language is an all-encompassing factor that deeply conditions individual existence and culture, the same holds true for Tibetans.

The preservation of a language for any community is not only a means to preserve histories and aspects of culture, but also to reassert their existence. Indigenous communities around the world, such as Tibetans have rich ties to oral accounts and histories that are inseparable from their identity. (Mahuika, 2019, p. 1) Therefore, the language used within communities holds profound significance—spiritually, culturally, and emotionally. Hence, it can be said that the loss of a language signifies the erosion of a cultural ecosystem, as part of its essence fades away. On the other hand, the preservation of language ensures that traditions and customs endure, thriving in the hearts and minds of those who comprehend its depth.

This essay aims to explore the history and conflict of Tibet and the implications of the Tibetan migration in 1959 on the establishment, stability, and continuity of Tibetan identities, specifically through the lens of language erosion of a minority community in a foreign land. Using a primarily qualitative

approach, this historical exploration uses secondary sources namely archival material, reports from governmental and international agencies, and existing scholarship on Tibetan language along with primary information in the form of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the first and second generation Tibetan immigrants, settled in various regions of the India including Delhi, Darjeeling, and Dharamshala. The focus of this research is to understand the complex dimensions of linguistic preservation, examining the historical roots, cultural significance, and contemporary challenges faced by the Tibetan community post migration. Through a multi-layered approach, it seeks to portray the connection between language and identity, shedding light on how the Tibetan language serves as a binding thread between the Tibetan diaspora in India and their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of continuity and belonging despite their geographical and political upheavals.

Tibet and China: History and Conflict

The history of Tibet can sharply be divided into three time periods – first, the period of dynastic rule which ended with the invasion of China; second, the Chinese occupation of Tibet which began in 1951 when Communist forces occupied Tibet; and third, the contemporary period when Tibetans have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, especially India. One of the earliest relations between China and Tibet was during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907) when King Songsten Gampo unified Tibet by marrying a Chinese princess. During the Mongolian Yuan dynasty both China and Tibet were under the control of the same political power in the 13th and 14th centuries. Further, the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), made no concrete effort to impose Chinese administrative control to the Tibetan area. It was actually the Manchu or Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that exerted more formal control over Tibet, such as creating a distinction between “Political Tibet” and “Ethnographic Tibet”. The Manchu Dynasty brought many border areas inhabited by Tibetans under the jurisdiction of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, which helped strengthen connections between China and Tibet, and reinforced the idea of Tibet being a part of China. (Mahuika, 2019, p. 56)

For the most part, the Qing Dynasty presented themselves as inclusive rulers who regarded all five communities, namely the Chinese, Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Uyghur, as equals and credited themselves as capable of dealing with different communities, their beliefs, customs, and languages. (Bickers, 2016, p. 69) This patronage however, started to reduce when the dynasty weakened towards the end of the 19th century, and figures such as Zhao Erfeng emerged as important holders of power. (Mukherjee, 2021)

Although a Qing official, Erfeng implemented policies such as *Gaitu guliu* (translated as “reform” or “reforming the land and returning to stream”), which sought to put an end to the governing system of ethnic minorities such as Tibetans, in Kham region of erstwhile Tibet, and in Lhasa. (Gurung, 2022)

In 1912, when the Qing Dynasty finally collapsed in its entirety, the then Dalai Lama organised a secret war department and expelled Qing soldiers from Tibetan soil, leading to an independent Tibet in the year 1913. Between the years 1913 to 1949, Tibet did not face any major threats from China, nor was it perceived as an area of concern because the Chinese were more focused in the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, while simultaneously resisting the spread of Japanese imperialism. After their victory in the civil war, the “liberation” of Tibet and Tibetans from “feudal oppression” became a goal for the Communists. (Mukherjee, 2021) As the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Mao Zedong (or Tsetung) was eager to resolve the Tibet issue due to supposed “ethnic contradictions” (Zedong, 2023, p. 367) between peoples in the region. In his concluding remarks at the Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (September 13, 1948) Mao stated,

“...In addition, there are some ethnic contradictions domestically, for example the

contradictions between the Han and the national minorities in the regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. There are also contradictions between the Han and the Muslims. There are also contradictions within a certain ethnicity. We could solve them as the Soviet Union did.”

Evident from the above statement, the CCP’s position on ethnic minorities in the region was similar to Lenin and Stalin’s approach post the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when the idea of self-determination of differing nationalities and ethnic groups was overridden by the idea of collective struggle against capitalist imperialist powers; the same model was adopted by Mao. (Howland, 2011) “Liberation of Tibet” as an idea was seen as a test of the new communist regime’s legitimacy amongst the Chinese people and the whole world. (Jian, 2006) Along with being used as a means to create political legitimacy for the CCP, regions such as Tibet were also seen as strategic militarily. Tibet bordering with India, Bhutan, and Nepal was eventually perceived as a geopolitically strategic region for China in the southwest direction.

Even though Tibet had independent status from the years 1911-1950, it was never formally recognised by the international community, unlike the People’s Republic of China (PRC) which received formal recognition since its formation. This led Mao and other CCP officials to believe that using force to occupy Tibet would not lead to severe backlash or repercussions amongst the international community. The occupation of Tibet by China’s military force, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was successful as Tibet had no means of military resistance that could overpower the Chinese. After the occupation of Tibet, a seventeen-point agreement was signed on 23th May 1951, which opened a new epoch for Beijing and Tibet’s relations. Although the agreement was signed by both sides, the terms were considered highly unequal. As a part of the agreement, Tibet’s integration with China was declared as irreversible and permanent, while China’s commitment to respect Tibetan traditions and coexist with the existing social, political, economic, and monarchic systems of Tibet, was categorised as conditional. In practice, the PRC went a step further and initiated radical reforms which sought to alter the traditional Tibetan identity and eventually sparked a revolt that spread across different parts of Tibet. Ultimately, the idea of liberation stemmed from a sense of Chinese superiority; the act of liberating something or someone is premised on the liberators regarding themselves as more capable in ideals and resources, which is precisely what the CCP believed. They regarded themselves as the sole authority who could decide if the socially, politically, and culturally “backward” Tibet needed to be liberated. The CCP’s disregard for the cultural and religious history of Tibet eventually led to the Tibetan uprising in 1959.

On 10th March 1959, thousands of Tibetans gathered around Norbulinka, the Dalai Lama’s residence in the summer. The crowd was believed to have gathered in response to rumours that the CCP was going to arrest the Dalai Lama by luring him into attending a cultural performance at the PLA’s headquarters. Since there was no way to identify the official source, the CCP claimed that the gathering was instigated by the “reactionary upper stratum”. It was clear that the tensions between the Communist party and the people of Tibet had heightened to the point that a majority of Tibetans were willing and wanting to protest. By afternoon of the same day, this gathering had transformed into a large-scale popular revolt. Protestors walked around every corner of Lhasa holding banners and chanting slogans of “independence of Tibet” and “Chinese go away”. In retaliation, the Chinese employed force to curb the protests, including the use of shelling at the Norbulinka palace. Thousands of protestors around the palace were killed, which included civilians as well as officials within the palace. Popular monasteries within Lhasa were also attacked, and their monks were either killed or transported into the city to work as slave labour. Over 86,000 Tibetans were killed by Chinese forces during this period of unrest. Due to the increased instability within Tibet, Tibetan officials saw it best that the Dalai Lama flees Tibet for his safety and the continuation of the centuries-long Dalai Lama tradition that grounded life in Tibet. (Jian, 2006, p. 76) Over 80,000 Tibetans proceeded to flee Tibet after the Dalai Lama left, in order to be close to

their spiritual leader, as well as due to the imminent threat to their existence and lives. (Dorjee et al., 2011) Till this day Tibetans are spread across the world, majorly in areas of South Asia, in settlements where they reside alongside the local community and have sought to re-establish their livelihood from scratch.

Tibetan Identity: Buddhism and Culture

Five decades ago, Tibet was an independent country with its own land, people, and government, comprising of three major regions of North-eastern (Domed or Amdo), Eastern (Dotoe or Kham), and Central (U-Tsang) provinces. The roots of Tibetan identity and culture are deeply intertwined with the region's unique geography, political history, and religious beliefs. Historic developments in Tibet have brought forth changes in the culture and customs of the people, particularly with regards to their religion. Politically, Tibet is a region with a recorded history dating back to 127 B.C. After the unification of different regions of the plateau into one single country, the empire of Tibet reached its glory during the 7th and 8th centuries, conquering the states along the Silk Route, parts of Nepal and India, and even T'ang China for a brief period. The Sui and T'ang dynasty annals have descriptions of Tibet and have characterised Tibetans as ruthless and aggressive, traits alluding to its success in military conquests in 8th century China. (Gyatso, 1987, p. 38) Buddhism was introduced to Tibet in the early 7th century A.D. during the reign of King *Srong-btsan sgam-po* (Songtsen Gampo), who had two wives, both devout Buddhists who brought their religious texts and images to the kingdom in their dowry. (Ch'en, 1957, p. 117). The king built two temples which harboured these items, and after the persuasion of his wives converted to Buddhism himself. (Banerjee, 1981, p. 75)

After his conversion, Songtsen Gampo felt the need to introduce Buddhism in his own country as part of social and cultural reforms. He wanted each individual in the country to be encouraged to lead a pure and simple life, fostering love for their homeland as well as respect for sentient beings around them as presented through the teachings of Buddhism. Additionally, several Buddhist scholars frequented Tibet from India and shared various texts and teachings of the religion. Slowly, the religion integrated itself with Tibetan society as well as with what was considered to be the indigenous religion of Tibet— “Bon”, which was introduced in the region many centuries before Buddhism. As a religion, Bon grew in royal patronage until its replacement by Buddhism during King Songtsen Gampo's reign. (Kværne, 1995, p. 13) At first, Buddhism faced opposition from the believers of Bon, and was rarely spoken of in the next few decades. However, struggles between the members of the ruling house who supported Buddhism, and the noble families who sided with Bon, led to the decline of Bon as a practiced religion. Although it continued in certain family lineages, it did not enjoy royal privilege ever again. Initially, Western scholars regarded *Bonpo* (Bon) texts as uninspired plagiarism of Buddhist texts, however in recent years this view has witnessed a drastic shift, where the once rival religions Buddhism and Bon are considered to have a relationship of mutual influence.

In numerous societies, group identity is prominently expressed through languages, accents, and dialects. While not disregarding the significance of dress styles, foods, and unique forms of Buddhism that contribute to their lifestyles, Tibetan language and literature plays a crucial role in portraying and upholding these cultural aspects. (Dorjee et al., 2011) Tibetans in general, identify with Buddhist spirituality and attach a great deal of emotional significance to it. Tibetan language has been critical for the preservation of the vast collection of Buddhist literature which include the *Sutrās* (original discourses of Buddha) and the *Shāstrās* (Indian Buddhist commentaries). Over the years, Buddhism has developed more into a lifestyle for Tibetans rather than religion, hence preserving these texts holds utmost significance for the continuation of the culture itself. The Tibetan language also has a wide range of dialects, many of which are minorities in the larger realm of the language itself and are therefore imperative to preserve. (Smith, 2017) Some of these dialects are *U-kad* (spoken in the central region), *Kham-kad* (spoken in the eastern region) and *Am-kad* (spoken in the north-eastern region). In order to

avoid problems in communication, *U-kad* is used as the official dialect to communicate across regions as it is widely understood and used by most Tibetans.

The Aftermath of Displacement: Preserving Tibetan Culture in India

The arrival of the Dalai Lama in India in 1959 marked the beginning of Tibetan migration into India. Thousands of Tibetan refugees followed the Dalai Lama into India, seeking asylum in order to avoid persecution and to preserve their culture and religious traditions. (Dorjee & Rigzin, 2024) The Indian government, at that time, welcomed the Tibetan refugees and granted them land as well as rehabilitation. Presently, Dharamshala serves as the core of the Tibetan government-in-exile and the spiritual centre of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. Over time with increasing migration, 54 Tibetan settlements emerged in India which are located in the states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Orissa, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. These settlements were originally intended to be temporary abodes for Tibetans arriving in India, serving as provisional settlement areas where the displaced could find sustenance, shelter, medical assistance, both traditional and modern education, and avenues for livelihood during their exile; however over time, they have emerged as prominent permanent Tibetan settlements in India. While some of the Tibetans found refuge in areas like Dharamshala, Shimla, or Darjeeling, which are similar to Tibet in terms of topography and climates, others had to move to states in Southern India with vastly differing climatic conditions from Tibet. In these settlements, work was established in the form of agriculture, carpet weaving, and occasional small-scale businesses. These communities were set up with the aim of enabling Tibetans to safeguard their unique culture, religious practices, and national identity while preparing for the eventual return to a liberated Tibet. (Pehrson , 2003)

The journey towards another region, such as the Himalayan landscape of India, is perilous and extremely difficult. Nevertheless, each year new bouts of Tibetan immigrants arrive in India. With continuous bouts of migration, the idea of a homeland continues to be renewed and refreshed in community discourses and imaginations through the new immigrant population. (Swank, 2011, p. 51) Migration inherently triggers sentiments of displacement, yearning, and a quest for a sense of belonging, while simultaneously evoking profound emotions due to the growing uncertainty of returning to one's homeland. The detachment from the familiar, in terms of family, regions, and established power structures results in a feeling of discrimination, nostalgia and yearning. Yet, as time progresses, connections with individuals and places that remain out of reach, tend to gradually weaken, and diminish, eventually transforming into idealized memories. The Tibetan diaspora, like any other diasporic community, is not a monolith and has various subgroups and settlements that have been established within it over the years. Since the founding of the exile communities, often referred to as 'mini-Tibets', divisions between generations, especially the youth and the elderly have become increasingly distinct. Most elders continue to maintain everyday practices of old Tibet, while the youth have embraced music, fashions, and the language of the urban Indian population. The greatest challenge confronting Tibetan immigrants in India is preserving their native culture, specifically the Tibetan language. At present the Tibetan diaspora in India is in its third generation; while the first and second generation are keen to retain their culture, the third generation is often reported as being somewhat alienated from the traditional way of life. (Ahmad, 2012, p. 40) This results in a contrast where on the one hand, the older generation still longs to return to their homeland, on the other hand, after availing the economic benefits provided by the host country, the younger generations are less keen to invest themselves in the cause of cultural preservation.

Preserving Tibetan Language and Culture

Despite attempts to suppress Tibetans and their centuries old practices, lifestyle, and languages, there have been several initiatives and attempts of cultural reconstruction that have been implemented across Tibetan settlements, especially in South Asian countries like India, which harbours much of the

Tibetan population in exile. These efforts have sought to preserve Tibetan scripts, oral histories, performing and visual arts by displaced Tibetans in order to contribute to the preservation of everything inherent to Tibet. In order to explore such initiatives, in addition to secondary sources, this essay has used in-depth semi-structured interviews with linguistic and cultural experts in India, to explore the existing framework of Tibetan language preservation, and sought to understand how displaced Tibetan communities feel about such efforts.

Educational Initiatives

The department of education is one of the seven departments of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), in India. Based in Dharamshala, it was established in 1960 to take charge of the educational affairs of the Tibetan community that was in exile in India. The Dalai Lama had given education topmost relevance after going into exile in 1959. Subsequently discussions were held with the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to establish separate schools for children of Tibetan refugees in partnership with the Indian government.

In 1959, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's exile to India, caring for the orphaned and displaced Tibetan children became an important matter amongst the Tibetan community. The importance of nurturing the younger generation for Tibet's future was recognised by the Dalai Lama, who proposed the establishment of a centre for Tibetan children in Dharamshala. With assistance from the Indian government, the "Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children" was established in May 1960 to provide basic care and send children to government schools, but soon this became unsustainable due to overcrowding. Under the guidance of the then Director of the nursery, Mrs. Jetsun Pema, a reorganisation plan was formulated, which sought help from private donors and international aid organizations. The campus eventually expanded and evolved into what is now known as the Upper Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) School at Dharamshala. The TCV is affiliated to the department of Central Tibetan Administration which oversees 63 Tibetan schools, such as the Central Tibetan Schools Administration (6 schools), Tibetan Homes Foundation (4 schools), Tibetan Children's Villages (15 schools), Snow Lion Foundation (9 schools), and Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society (28 schools). There are around 2,033 staff members and 15,155 students enrolled in these schools.

Since its formal establishment in 1972, the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) has grown into an integrated educational community for Tibetan children who are alone and escaping from Tibet, and has branches across India, with 15 schools and approximately 5,786 students and 881 staff members. TCV acknowledges its responsibility for the future of Tibetan children and are proud to see their alumni serving the Tibetan community, furthering the schools' commitment to continuous improvement. Their future direction, as highlighted by the Dalai Lama, focuses on further education in specialised studies to meet the community's needs during. They aim to improve education quality and cultural upbringing while preserving their traditional culture and lifestyle.

Along with the TCV Schools, the Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society was also established to maintain and care for Tibetan schools in remote areas, far from the mainstream Tibetan community settlements. Many Tibetans are based in smaller remote towns, far from larger settlements which sometimes proves to be an advantage as it provides them with opportunities that would not be available in a competitive larger town. However, at the same time, their children could not be enrolled into schools managed by the Department of Education (DoE) as they were too far from designated locations. In such cases, local Tibetan bodies in these areas started schools trying to emulate the TCV or other Tibetan schools' models; nevertheless, they soon posed a maintenance challenge for local bodies. The initial enthusiasm of these schools slowly declined over time and were handed over to the DoE for management and sustenance of localized schools. Under the DoE, the numbers of such schools increased, and a formal

body called the Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society was established to maintain and run such Tibetan schools.

Along with the establishment of a formal educational framework, cultural initiatives within Tibetan communities also contributed to the preservation of Tibetan language. The Manjushree Centre of Tibetan Culture in Darjeeling, established 1988 is one such non-profit cultural centre affiliated to the Department of Religion and Culture, of the Central Tibetan Administration, that has been providing Tibetan language lessons and seminars for beginners as well as advanced learners. In conversation with a social worker, who is one of the founding members of the centre, he mentioned,

“Many of the second generation parents of the kids at home speak minimal Tibetan and when they go out, they speak the local language or Hindi. The fear of a loss of language is there. That is the reason we felt a need for a Tibetan centre— Tibetan children can interact with each other and children from other schools and they can learn a lot from that.”

With the increasing disconnect between generational values, much of traditional Tibetan culture was argued to be decreasing due to the cosmopolitan influence of the world. Across the many interviews taken, respondents unanimously spoke about the need to promote speaking the language at home as necessary. Respondents mentioned despite being born and raised in a foreign country, speaking Tibetan at home was a must, regardless of whether they used the language in other settings or not. This, however, was only true for second generation Tibetans, but especially relevant, yet lacking, for third generation Tibetans.

Documentation and Archives

Archives, specifically linguistic archives play an important role in helping communities and cultures preserve their identity. In addition to being a source for the community to formally register and preserve its linguistic records, archives also help community members and other interested individuals to learn more about a community and the prior custodians that held that knowledge; this is often not available otherwise without archival material. (Conathan, 2011, p. 236) The same stands for the Tibetan community, for whom both linguistic and cultural preservations have become vital for the survival of their indigenous identities.

The Tibet Oral History project is one such unique archival space where interviews containing personal and community histories have been documented and preserved. Started in 2003 by Dr. Marcella Adamski, the goal of the Tibet Oral History project was to document accounts of elder Tibetans in exile who had experienced life in Tibet before the Chinese rule in the region. The Tibetan elders interviewed by the project are the last generation to have lived in free Tibet, without any political restrictions. Majority of the elders interviewed (82%) for the project were in the age group of 70s to 80s, which was another factor that contributed to the urgency for such a preservation space. This oral history collection gave space for the last generation of Tibetans who have lived in an unoccupied Tibet to share their stories and ways of life, in hopes that while looking at Tibet, individuals would have a more nuanced understanding of the series of events that led to Tibetan migration and the impact of the same over a community.

The project includes various themes of documentation such as: culture and history, Buddhist Traditions (including Bon), Chinese invasion and occupation, oppression, and imprisonment, as well as resistance and revolution. A total of 304 interviews are presently available in the archive's official page consisting of both video and transcriptions. The interviews were conducted in locations such as India, Nepal, The United States of America, and Canada, documenting stories of Tibetans living in different locations in order to trace narratives across a diverse range of occupations such as monks, nuns, farmers, weavers, herders, and traders. Printed copies of these records have been distributed to 40 recognised bodies like Tibetan communities, libraries, and universities across the globe, including the U.S. Library of

Congress, Oxford University, The British Library, Tibetan Children's Village (Bylakuppe, India), Tibetan Community in Switzerland and Liechtenstein, and The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala.

In addition to being a form of preservation, documentation is also a way to re-establish existence, which often becomes critical for displaced communities to preserve their traditional and oral histories. The importance of such archives was often emphasised by the respondents for this study. The Director of the Tibet Museum in Dharamshala argued,

“I think that language is a crucial aspect of any culture because without language nothing remains, you lose so much of your culture.”

After the occupation of Tibet, several culturally significant sites, artefacts, and manuscripts have been destroyed by the Chinese government in order to erase the heritage of Tibetans. In response, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives was established in the year 1970 by the 14th Dalai Lama as “a repository of some of the finest Tibetan manuscripts” (Patgaonkar, 2022), to restore, protect, promote, and preserve the culture of Tibetan communities. At the time of escape, Tibetans carried several things that they thought needed to be preserved from the Chinese, such as Tibetan books, statues, paintings, and manuscripts that are now being preserved at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA), Dharamshala.

Much like the Oral History Project, the LTWA also includes a vast selection of archival material such as Buddhist manuscripts, a digital library, museum, oral history, video archive, and photographic archive, all aspects which have been critical for the preservation of the Tibetan language. Their photographic archive, established in 1991, is useful to deconstruct any propaganda or false information surrounding Tibet. This archive also helps bring forth the point that the region is not ‘forbidden’, as popularised by the Chinese, but has a long civilizational history.

The Tibet Museum in Dharamshala is another archival space significant among the Tibetan community. It was established in the year 1998, to preserve, research, exhibit and educate Tibetans as well as non-Tibetans on everything related to Tibet's language, culture, history, and present state. The permanent museum exhibition is called “I am Tibetan, This is My Story”, and is divided into ten sections, including a vast repository of 29,186 images which exhibit the history and culture surrounding Tibet. These are divided into sections such as generalities, religion, the arts, social sciences, technology, and geography, and history.

Cultural Institutions and Organizations

Out of the many Tibetan settlements established in India, the state of Darjeeling houses numerous Tibetan refugees who arrived in India in the 1950s. Situated at “Hillside” in Lebung, the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre was established on October 2nd 1959, to provide emergency relief to Tibetan refugees who had just crossed over the Himalayas. (Basu, 2010) The centre is home to 650 refugees and offers various activities to sustain the little community it has created, with handicraft constituting the primary source of income. At present, the centre has been exporting products made by Tibetan refugees to 36 countries around the world. During a conversation with a respondent, a resident and worker of the centre, specified that her parents had come to the centre in 1957, before her birth. She added that after her birth in the centre, she was trained in the art of carpet weaving; at the time of the interview, she was working to weave a carpet similar to that created by her parents 60 years ago.

In Tibet, the demand for fine handicrafts was little, and hence the art was only known to master craftsmen who had to undergo years of apprenticeship. However, after the displacement, handicrafts became an important source of livelihood for the community. At the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre,

they have trained over 1,600 persons in various crafts of which over 1,000 have left the Centre to set up their own enterprises. In addition to handicrafts, the Centre also offers alternative skill training such as refining sheep wool and the making of woollen coats, shawls, blankets etc. Although Hindi, Bengali and English are the more prominently used languages in Darjeeling, at the Centre the residents were observed to solely converse in the Tibetan language, which they argued was a way to promote the usage of the language and strengthen community ties; in many ways the Centre presented itself as a culturally distinct place from the bustling life of Darjeeling.

International Support

Several countries and international organizations have expressed concerns about human rights abuses and restrictions on religious and cultural freedoms in Tibet and have called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is one such organisation that has lobbied for the autonomy and rights of Tibetans at global platforms such as the United Nations. Since its establishment in 1988, the ICT advocates for the rights of wrongfully imprisoned Tibetans, ending the occupation for Tibet, and combating the climate change Tibet has had to face after occupation under China.

The United States of America has proven to be a strong ally in the Tibetan cause considering its long history of policies and programs that protect and promote Tibetan culture, as well as the series of dialogues it hosted between China and the Dalai Lama. Through the help of an advocacy team, the ICT has worked closely with the US congress over the years in order to pass several laws that empower the Tibetan people. One such notable act is the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 which was brought forth to address human rights concerns of Tibetans, support the aspirations of young Tibetans, and help in the preservation of cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of the Tibetan people. (Tibetan Policy Act of 2001, 2001) One of the most impactful part of this legislation is the section that recognises the state of Tibet as “occupied”, with a clear definition of the series of events and actions taken by the occupational force in the past few decades. The act also holds the United States administration responsible for maintaining global dialogue on the issue of Tibet and appoint specialised personnel, such as a US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues whose duties and responsibilities include coordination of United States Government policies, programs, and projects concerning Tibet; promoting a policy to protect the distinct historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of Tibet; raising international opinion on human rights violations among the Tibetan refugees; maintaining close and direct contact with religious, cultural, and political leaders of Tibet, including regular travel to the Tibetan areas occupied by the People's Republic of China, and Tibetan refugee settlements in India as well as Nepal; consult with Congress on policies relevant to Tibet and the future and welfare of the Tibetan people; make significant efforts to establish contacts in the foreign ministries of other countries to pursue a negotiated solution for Tibet; and finally have adequate resources, staff, and administrative support for the mission.

In her address to the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) Ministerial Conference in November, 2023 organised by the ICT, the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, Uzra Zeya, (as of November 2023) spoke about the Sinicization of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism due to Chinese interference in matters regarding the practice of Buddhism, the functioning of monasteries. (U.S. Department of State, 2023) In Tibetan society, the monks and nuns of Tibet play an important role in teaching Tibet's language and history. However, the occupational Chinese rule in Tibet is making a centuries old process such the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama as a process controlled by the state rather than the people who practice Tibetan Buddhism. In her speech, she credited the American government for raising the issue of human rights abuses by the People's Republic of China and for encouraging dialogue between the PRC and representatives of the Dalai Lama.

The UN has also showcased support for Tibet when The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights called for an end to forced relocations and the state-run boarding school system in Tibet. Consisting of independent experts, the committee expressed concern regarding the condition of Tibetans living under China's rule,

“[They] Face severe restrictions in the realization of their right to take part in cultural life, including the right to use and teach minority languages, history and culture.” (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2023)

UN experts: In a joint press release (February 2023), Mr. Fernand de Varennes, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Ms. Farida Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on the right to education, and Alexandra Xanthaki, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, expressed their concerns for the substantial increase in the reports of human rights violations in the state-run residential schools in regions occupied by China. They stated,

“As a result [of these residential schools] Tibetan children are losing their facility with their native language and the ability to communicate easily with their parents and grandparents in the Tibetan language, which contributes to their assimilation and erosion of their identity”. (United Nations, 2023)

Through these concerns the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also tried to address the larger matter of the Sinicization of various identities in China extending beyond Tibetans to include Uyghurs, and Kazakhs. The Committee added that with rapid closures of schools providing teaching in minority languages, young Tibetan children were left with little choice but to be admitted to the boarding schools based on Han Chinese ideals. The committee also highlighted the presence of a large-scale campaign by the Chinese government that sought to erase Tibetan culture, including language and undermine the linguistic identity of ethnic minorities in China.

Through platforms such as the United Nations, and with support from global powers like America, the ICT was able to shed more light on the history and state of Tibetans around the world, which generated greater awareness for the cause outside the confines of Asia, especially in the global West resulting in numerous foundations, organizations, countries, and governments expressing their support for Tibet.

Challenges and Threats

In the present era of globalization, it has become imperative and inevitable to communicate across different languages in order to secure employment. The existing scholarship has highlighted the importance of acquiring working knowledge of languages like English and other dominant languages of host countries as a necessary factor for survival. (Grenier, 2015) As a reason, in addition to their native language, immigrants are required to learn the dominant languages of their host countries in order to sustain themselves economically, socially, and culturally.

When communities migrate into a country, they carry their own resources, habits, practices, and beliefs; additionally, they constitute an important source of human capital for the host country. (Angelini et al., 2015, p. 818) In order to sustain employment in a foreign land individuals must be familiar with as mentioned, the languages and culture of the area, however familiarisation with the dominating aspects of a host country often leads to the assimilation of minority cultures, and not all immigrants view such demands of assimilation as justified. The Director of the Tibet Museum vehemently expressed,

“Language is also important for Tibetans so that we don't get assimilated into the Indian identity, because we are Tibetan not Indian.”

However, the resistance to assimilation was also reported to be getting weaker across generations. Over the years, Tibetans in India have acquired the local ways of dance, music, dressing, and cooking. They have even adopted numerous Hindi words into their language and everyday conversation such as the word *bazāra* for market, and *chutti* for vacation or holiday. Tibetan school graduates from schools such as the TCV write and speak at least 3 languages— Hindi, English, and Tibetan, and interact with their peers and others in any of these languages or mixes of them. (Dorjee et al., 2011, p. 346) This has raised concern among the diaspora in regards to preserving the traditional form of Tibetan language, due to newer generations, such as the third generation Tibetans adopting a more modern way of conversing which includes a fusion of all three languages in their speech.

First generation immigrants found it easier to retain and speak their native Tibetan language due to the use of the language at home, and in some cases in schools if they attended Tibetan schools. This situation, however, changed for the third generation of Tibetans who were born fifty years after the migration. This generation knew only of Tibet through stories passed down from their parents or grandparents. This has resulted in variations in the idea of Tibet amongst generations. As explained by a second generation Tibetan in the Manjushree Centre for Tibetan Culture,

“They [my parents] did not know any other language other than Tibetan, and they could only communicate with us in Tibetan, so we also picked up Tibetan well, that [losing the language] wasn't really the fear. But the next generation— my kids, they got a modern education, in an English medium. So, with the third generation, the language is a little bit of a problem. My kids can speak Tibetan but not fluently.”

While language erasure can take place due to assimilation into the identity of the majority, it can also take place due to economic reasons. In their interactions, Tibetans located in metropolitan cities such as Delhi mentioned that their children were generally educated in English medium schools and were often fluent in English and Hindi which helped them in relocating to other cities, and in some cases countries, in search for high-paying jobs. For third generation Tibetans, learning languages like English or Hindi carry definite economic advantages as it directly leads to better employment and income opportunities; in contrast learning the Tibetan language brings them no economic benefit except for its contribution towards the preservation of their native language. For a community that was forced to abandon their land and resources and find their own means of sustenance, economic benefits are extremely important for survival. It is therefore not surprising that second generation Tibetans sought to educate their children in English medium schools with the hope of gaining the skills necessary for a pursuing a successful career. (Malek , 2023) Tibetan on the other hand does not offer such economic benefits or social benefits that a more prominently spoken language in India, such as Hindi offers. In the present political environment wherein the government is placing a lot of emphasis on the usage of languages such as Hindi, minority languages, especially that of immigrant population like Tibet, would naturally have decreased space. (Daniyal, 2020) Another respondent whose family owns a Tibetan handicraft gallery in Delhi's 'Majnu Kā Tīlā' colony, famously known as 'Little Tibet' due to the largely Tibetan inhabitants, explained,

“I'm a third generation Tibetan. We try to keep whatever we can of our culture alive such as speaking in Tibetan and celebrating our festivals. Outside our business we speak in Tibetan but here only in English or Hindi otherwise we get discriminated against.”

'Majnu kā Tīlā' is an interesting site which in addition to being a prominent Tibetan settlement, is also a hub for new-age styles and activities which are now fused with some aspects of Tibetan culture and has found a consumer base among Delhiites who otherwise have little idea about the history of Tibet. To communicate with customers and ensure smooth function of their business, Tibetans in the colony have learned to speak fluently in Hindi and English.

As a non-native language, Tibetan is not taught in government-funded schools and is not included under any other examination boards like the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). The Tibetan language is formally taught only in schools opened by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), which presently function only in larger towns and cities, making it difficult for Tibetans residing in places which are considered “off the grid” to access.

Along with the lack of formal Tibetan education, another factor that may be affecting the willingness to learn the language is the differing opinion amongst Tibetans regarding their cultural belonging. Identities are not fixed or monolithic, they often change and evolve across generations. It is not uncommon for the second and third generation diaspora to oppose their parents’ or grandparents’ particular view on what constitutes their identity. (Féron, 2017, p. 369) This is similar in the case of the Tibetan diaspora as well. Tina Lauer’s study on “Tibetan Identity and its Effects on the Second Generation” (2015) mentions that for most respondents in her study, Tibetan language skills formed a large part of their self-understanding and were crucial to feel a sense of connectedness within the diaspora. (Lauer, 2015, p. 170) However, she added that considering a singular aspect of one’s cultural identity, namely language, to be primary and all-encompassing can also lead to exclusion within the diaspora itself, and ultimately result in the creation of a binary in one’s identity, wherein those proficient in the language are deemed to be a “complete Tibetan”, while others are said to be “not complete”. A similar binary was also echoed by respondents of this study,

“It's difficult to fit into other communities. So, when it comes to your culture and language, it's very important one knows their own language spoken and written, and then your own religion so that you have become a complete Tibetan.”

While the sentiment of cultural continuation and preservation through the means of language is imperative for persecuted groups such as Tibetans, somewhere along the way ideas such as “completeness” or having a certain level of well-versed ness in particular aspects of culture create conflict within the diaspora itself. Although third generation Tibetans are more in sync with modern Indian consumerist lifestyles, their Tibetan identity cannot be disregarded. Ideas such as these, while linked to a noble cause of preservation, can lead to feelings of inferiority and exclusion amongst younger Tibetans and might discourage them from taking an active part in their community and the preservation of their linguistic as well as cultural heritage.

Conclusion

It is evident that the Tibetan diaspora is a community with a history of persecution and fears losing their cultural and linguistic heritage.

Post their migration, and with increasing cultural adaptation, their identity now includes several cultural and linguistic aspects of the regions in which the community has settled into— such as adopting words from other languages into their own. While the Tibetan community is keen on retaining their linguistic identity and have taken several steps towards preservation through organisations, education of Tibetan youth, and even their own unique government in exile, they have nonetheless, encountered challenges such as the threat to the loss of language usage due to the growing generational gap within the community.

While the first generation Tibetan refugees who grew up speaking the language exhibited proficiency in the language, the second and third generation of Tibetans were familiar with the language only in extension from the previous generation i.e. their parents. Although for many it continued to be a language spoken in their homes, as they grew up and went to English medium schools and sought prospective careers, the Tibetan language grew increasingly distant from its usage outside of their homes.

While some children continued to maintain familiarity due to their education in Tibetan language schools established by the Tibetan government in exile, the number of such learners was, however, limited. Even among these children, many were forced to adapt to the English language in order to pursue higher education and eventually successful careers. Over time, many third generation Tibetans lost fluency in the language, while some completely lacked native familiarity to begin with. This generational gap in language proficiency has further created a disconnect between the newer generation Tibetans and their native cultural identity.

Language is a constant thread that binds a community together. It is not simply a means of communication and speech, but a medium through which shared knowledge amongst communities is preserved, transmitted, distributed, and then acquired by the new generations. It is imperative for the Tibetan community and the government in exile to continuously make conscious, concentrated, and focused efforts to preserve the language of Tibet, otherwise this persecuted community is already at the cusp of losing its culture, religion, and identity.

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