

Ways of Remembering: How the Tibetan Self is Constructed in Exile

OBJECT OF STUDY

China invaded Tibet and displaced millions of people for economic and political gain. The means through which this displacement and further dismantling was enabled is a part of the extra-geopolitical, more local domination that spreads over a large part of Asia's landscape and abroad. But my paper only deals with that subplot of occupation, domination, oppression and control. Here I will analyse the ways in which the struggle for freedom of their homeland takes place on a cultural and community level. The more 'concrete', more 'masculine' geopolitical power structures and their implications in International Relations are not the concern of my paper, a choice driven by my methodology, my discipline and also driven by the overpowering economic and political strength of the Chinese regime in today's world. My paper is a meditative study of not the powerful but of the powerless. I explore here the techniques through which the 'power'less not only deal with their loss but also posit a politics of their own that aspires for freedom. The first world- the world of strategic domination of Tibet in the geopolitical sense is a world and a process in itself that has been completed in the formal sense. However this paper argues for a second world, a world that uses mechanisms – social, psychological and cultural- through more immediate use of the space around, of the materials, institutions and commodities around- over which autonomous control can still be exercised. The second world will be my object of focus. This is not to say that the two worlds do not intersect. Some would argue that the second world is entrenched within the first. But my argument here is that the second world is unswervingly opposing the first, and that opposition occurs in the every day.

Thus the two structures, although engendered by each other do exist independently and in the case of the Tibetan diaspora, they are dissociated rather concretely by geographical space. The Tibetan diasporic community in India are comprised of people that have in a sense been defeated by the first world or in other words have exiled from the 'first world'. This is the reason why they now fight their battles in the second world which, I argue, has structures that are highly imaginative and are created based on a memory which itself is obscured by the shadow lines of the first world. These structures are the various ways in which this diasporic community retains its ties with its homeland.

LOCATING THE FIELD

Following from the mass exodus of Tibetan refugees in India in 1959, in the early 1960s, those Tibetans that had not yet rehabilitated into settlement colonies and were clustered in jhuggies around the Ladakh Budh Vihar were settled at the present plot of "Samyeling", New Aruna Nagar. Thus the Tibetan colony of Majnu ka Tilla developed on the banks of river Yamuna. The colony is divided into 12 blocks and comprising of about 363 permanent registered families and many more tenants and outstation students. An elected governing

body of 7 members is directly elected every 3 years and the Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamsala, which is the Tibetan government-in-exile, has a permanent representative known as the Settlement Officer in the colony. The colony has its own Day school, Health clinic and 2 temples of worship. The main sources of income are touristic as restaurants serving Tibetan delicacies, shops selling Tibetan jewellery and artefacts and lodging houses are the most common modes of income.

My observations are based on 15 in-depth interviews taken in the colony of Majnu ka Tilla and my focus will be not only on their individual experiences and reflections but I will also place these stories within context and code their experiences for themes. In order to understand that necessary background I visited Dharamsala, the exile capital of the Tibetan people for a week. Given that Dharamsala is the resident asylum of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the headquarters from which the Central Tibetan Administration works, my visit there was deeply insightful in understanding the kind of institutional and interactive structures that administer the lives and future of the community scattered all across the country. In Mcleodganj, I visited the office of the Central Tibetan Administration, the Parliament house, The Tibetan Women's Association, the Gu Chu Sum Movement (which is an institution that serves to help political prisoners inside Chinese prisons and also helps ex political prisoners in exile and their families), the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, the Tibetan Children's Villages, Upper Dharamsala, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Voice of Tibet(a radio channel relentless in its aim to broadcast into China-occupied Tibet), the Norbulingka, which is the 'heart of Tibetan culture' and many other local institutions and NGOs.

Through these visits, I was able to meet and have a personal audience with some of the formal intellectual and political leaders that are fighting to not only preserve their culture from assimilation but are also waging a battle against the Chinese invasion of their country through direct and indirect action.

When one is travelling via the outer ring road and looks at the Tibetan refugee camp of New Aruna Nagar, Chungtown and Samyeling, it already hits one with a sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness. As one enters the narrow alleyways of the colony, popularly known as Majnu Ka Tilla, there is a sense of temporary permanence that is palpable in the place whether it's the dingy alleys or the residential blocks that are located haphazardly in the various nameless lanes. The restaurants serve only authentic Tibetan food, play Tibetan music and on the walls are hung Tibetan Thangka paintings, portraits of Tibetan leaders and war-heroes. There are also book shops with a wide variety of literature on Tibetan folk tales, myths, Buddhist philosophy; shops selling pirated DVD's of Tibetan films; souvenir and handicrafts shops selling an assortment of trinkets that are all material forms of Tibetan culture; there are also local groceries and departmental stores selling Tibetan foods and meats imported from China. It immediately comes across as a homogenised and self-reliant space.

Through an investigation into the lived experiences of the residents, this paper explores how this community attempts a rejoinder with their ethnic past. Given the brutal divorce from the inimitable Tibetan setting, in an Indian context how easy or difficult or constrained the negotiation with identity becomes, given that the identity is already diminishing in value due to the tragic loss of the homeland. Through what means is that rejoinder possible and what are the challenges that are posed in this process?

A preliminary understanding will present that being a Tibetan entails the following -a sense of cultural uniqueness as Tibetans, a focus on ancestral continuity, acknowledgement of the charismatic leadership of his holiness and a fervent intense nationalism.

These will be my points of departure into the field and through this paper I will complicate these notions by understanding not only how these aspects are realised in practice but also critiquing some of these ideas with a sociological and anthropological lens.

STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONS

In the case of Tibetans residing in Majnu ka Tilla and in Dhasa, their past is one that is not only physically banished from them but also through time has become corroded. It is through cultural repositories and institutionalised forms of memory, as I will discuss in the paper that a rejoinder with their lost and troubled past is made possible.

Memories of Tibetan highlands and mountains, the snow and the yaks, the folk tales and mythic models present a picture of an exotica Tibet that has an immediate impact on identity discourses not only in Western representations of Tibet but also to the community themselves. This is the Shangri-la model that presents Tibet as a an untouched romantic past.

Secondly there are origin myths such as the Tibetan being a Bodhisattva monkey, who puts others' interests before his own. In actual practice, these models render themselves particularly useless when young Tibetans are confronted with identity crises of living in exile. Through this paper I will bring to light the various ways in which identification is accomplished. My argument is also that all of the means have the underlying principle of memory that enables their existence.

TCVs and TIBETAN HOMES SCHOOLS

Among the residents I spoke to in MKT, everyone below the age of 30 had been educated at a branch of Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV) or a Tibetan Homes School. I had the opportunity to visit the TCV in Samyeling, Majnu ka Tilla and the one in Upper Dharamsala. These Tibetanised schools are one of the major ways in which Tibetans in exile guard their unique culture and to transmit it to their posterity.

The first TVC was opened 54 years ago by the mother of His Holiness the Dali Lama in order to provide a 'Tibetanised' education to the hundreds of children living in exile. It provides

shelter and education to over 16000 children all over the country from Ladakh in the North to Bylakuppe in South. The loss of the Tibetan homeland and an extended exile in India has triggered a gradual dissolution and vacuuming of traditional Tibetan Meta- narratives which the TCV deliberately tries to compensate for. Self-images of Tibetan children and teenagers in exile have become fraught with anxiety. Many of the Tibetans I interacted with believed that the biggest struggle of living in exile is the R-letter that they feel is inscribed onto their foreheads. They say that because of their R-status they can't fully exploit their potentials.

Living in closed off Tibetan settlements, added to the physical phenotypic features of these young children gives way to a feeling of alienation and Othering that they must learn to deal with from a tender age. In TCVs and Tibetan Homes Schools, there is a conscious effort to provide a centre to these children whose lives have been uprooted and that "do not belong at the place they are at and can't go back either". So to an extent, and till a certain age reconciled, the socialisation that these schools enable help with the constant semiotic slippage.

TCVs all over India have been given a special status by the government of India whereby they are accredited by the CBSE board. They are taught in a special Tibetanised module till class V where the medium of instruction is Tibetan and from class VI onwards the medium shifts to English for all subjects.

I was able to visit the classrooms, common rooms and boarding rooms of children from the age of 2 to 18 in Dharamsala and Majnu ka tilla. As mentioned, the school space and curriculum is designed to foster Tibetaness. There are photographs of His Holiness in every room, the home mothers make sure the children do daily prayers. Some home mothers insist on doing kora, reciting mani, prostrating and fasting. There is an emphasis on learning as much about Tibet as one can. The classrooms are equipped with teaching and resource equipment such as dolls wearing the traditional Tibetan dress, the chuba and the Tibetan alphabet and Tibetan motifs and mastiffs are used as resource material. Tibetan games and Tibetan nursery rhymes are taught to each and every student. They are also required to observe all religious festivals and learn to cook Tibetan food.

SOCIAL AND BIOLOGICAL ORPHANS

Many of the people I met got to see their parents once in 10-15 years. One of my informants, Dolker Kyi, hadn't seen his parents for 20 years and spoke to me often about how he has anger issues that he accounts to this separation anxiety. Educated in a Tibetan Homes School, he had to drop out of college and had worked 14-15 jobs. Now he works as a waiter in a restaurant but has been thinking of going back home to his parents for the past 3-4 years. His is not an isolated story. Most young Tibetans that haven't met their parents for many years expressed having severe identity issues.

There is the crucial distinction between social and biological orphans in the case of exiled Tibetans. While some of the children in the schools have parents living in India, the majority of them are either orphans or have parents still living in Chinese-occupied Tibet.

The 'social orphan' still has the image of his parents living, but due to poverty or some other 'confining' social conditions were unable to nurture their child. As opposed to this, the 'biological orphan's' parents are actually dead. Honey Oberoi Vahali who wrote a book titled *Lives in Exile*, explored the psychological implications of living in exile. She notes that "while the first child vacillated between the hope of reunion and the rage of abandonment, the finality of death robbed the biological orphan of any possibility of hope. However this very finality, which forced the child to accept past losses, also left him free to explore and find out what the future held in store." (Vahali, 2009, 63)

ANCESTRAL CONTINUITY AND KINSHIP NETWORKS

The nature of culture is such that it gets passed on deftly as a tendency, an inclination, a propensity to a subsequent generation.

Young Tibetans that have the fortune of living with their parents in the various Tibetan settlements all over India are taught by their parents "how to be Tibetan." Kinship ties and patterns are crucial to holding any community together and in particular diasporic communities. My sibling informants Sonam Thiney, 24 and Pema Thiney, 27 told me similar stories about their childhood as they were growing up in Odisha.. While they were both very well accustomed to everything Indian, including the local Odia dialect, their parents who had exiled from Kham province of Tibet made sure that they would get good Tibetan education in a Tibetan school, central School of Tibet and also that they would observe all sorts of cultural and religious rituals and practices. Sonam, who now works as a nurse recollected, "I remember we used to crowd around our grandmother to tell us stories and always her stories were based in snowy Tibetan grasslands, would have yaks and snow lions and people drinking butter tea. It is through those stories that were told and retold to us that we were able to have a certain nostalgia about Tibet. When we were kids, my parents used to work on a farm and often the locals would tell us we don't belong here and that we were taking away from the cultivation what was theirs. We didn't look anything like the local boys and girls. It was only within the four walls of our school or at home when our grandmother would tell us stories and our mother would make tsampa that we would know we are Tibetans. "

Another Tibetan woman that works at the Gender Cell in Majnu ka Tilla, Tashi who is 39, had a similar view. She told me how she feels she must narrate the stories she heard from her parents to her children. In a moment of introspection she divulges, "Despite the many years of loss and despair and detachment from our homeland, we have succeeded in keeping our community together. The flags and the food help us but actually our biggest treasures are our stories which we will pass on to the subsequent generations. I tell my kids

I am preparing them to go back. Someday they will go back to Potala palace so I am preparing them for the march.”

FOOD

Another indicator to gauge a community's ethnic assertion is through food habits. There is a paradox of assimilation even here because while every one of my informants claimed that they could cook Tibetan food only a couple said they make Tibetan food on an everyday basis at home. As Sonam chuckled and said “ab to dal-roti ke bina bhi kaam nahi banta!”

Food habits raise questions of diffusion and assimilation but equipping oneself with Tibetan cooking is a matter of huge importance and pride to most Tibetans I interviewed. It too is indicative of their cultural assertion.

MARTYRDOM

Another institution that is crucial to the community's rejoinder with their ethnicity is that of martyrdom. Apart from the organisation of the Gu Chu Sum Movement there is also the Chushi Gangdrug Welfare Society in Majnu ka Tilla that observes and celebrates the martyrs that sacrificed their lives in the resistance movements in the 1940's. These institutions organise regular rallies and commemorative events and through these institutions many in the community are able to reminisce about their past glories and past struggles.

The latest count of self-immolations that have taken place in Tibet has reached 145. In Majnu ka Tilla, a candle light march is observed every time the news of a self-immolation reaches the exile community. It is through these community activities too that the community retains their Tibetan connection.

QUESTIONS OF BELONGING

Many of the people I interviewed communicated through different metaphors this feeling of being entangled between the past and the future. But it is crucial here to understand that all Tibetans young and old are extremely anxious of being assimilated culturally and socially into India. One of my informants Namdo, who works in a travel agency in Majnu Ka Tilla explained to me “you might meet a lot of young Tibetans in universities and they won't speak to you about the Tibetan cause. The truth is that they are very confused. It isn't as though they are indifferent to the cause, but the push and pull of the everyday has resulted in a lack of direction, a permanent stillness and a confusion which makes them very distraught. This is why we must continue striving for a free Tibet with all of our energies. The urgency of the situation lies in the assimilation. We have managed to sustain our Tibetanness despite a dangling 'R' that has troubled us every day, every minute for the past 56 years. we have been able to resist assimilation and that is our biggest success. His Holiness has taken care of us all.”

While I was conducting interviews my knowledge of geopolitics and its strategies and limitations made me put a question on my survey that was responded in unanimity with an emphatic “yes”, an “of course” or an “obviously”. The question was “Do you think Tibet will be free someday?”. While that is telling in its own right about the sense of fundamental hope that is required by any community living as refugees, what was even more interesting was the answer to the question that followed which was, “When Tibet is free, would you like to go back and live there or would you like to continue staying in India?” A quick analysis of the data showed me that out of all the people, only three said they would definitely like to go back and settle there. The rest said they’d gotten used to the ways here, some others said they would like to shuttle between Tibet and India for 3 months in turns, while there were still others that claimed they would only like to visit Tibet once and come back, as my informant Jackey called it, she’d like to “touch and leave”.

POLITICAL ASSERTION

Another way in which Tibetans connect with their ethnicity and nationality is through direct and indirect involvement in the freedom struggle i.e. Political assertion.

The political movement is internally divided into two fractions- the first and the formal position is the one proposed by His Holiness and also democratically adopted by the Central Tibetan Administration after a series of discussions over a long period of time. This is the Umeylam or Middle-Way Approach.

The official stand is this - “the Tibetan people do not accept the present status of Tibet under the People's Republic of China. At the same time, they do not seek independence for Tibet, which is a historical fact. Treading a middle path in between these two lies the policy and means to achieve a genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People's Republic of China. This is called the Middle-Way Approach, a non-partisan and moderate position that safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties-for Tibetans: the protection and preservation of their culture, religion and national identity; for the Chinese: the security and territorial integrity of the motherland; and for neighbours and other third parties: peaceful borders and international relations.” Based on a Buddhist concept, most of the people I interviewed in Majnu ka Tilla subscribe to Umeylam. The second and somewhat more radical approach is Rangzen which is Tibetan for Freedom and this view advocates for neither assimilation, nor autonomous rule but for complete and total independence.

I met many writers and political activists in Majnu ka Tilla and Dharamsala. There is a visible schism that exists between Rangzen and Umeylam supporters. That schism is of a religious nature. This observation was confirmed by many Tibetologists that I had the opportunity of reading and meeting during my research. In Majnu ka Tilla, when asked if people subscribe to either view, people would very commonly reply by saying they subscribe to His Holiness

The Dalai Lama's view. Umeylam is seen as being almost coterminous with the wisdom of His Holiness The Dalai Lama for the past many years.

Where the entire world is realising the importance of the values of secularism in politics, the Tibetan struggle still treasures its religious moorings. The unanimity of the Tibetan people to take the Middle-way approach was for me, as a sociologist, deeply telling of the religious ties and networks that exist within the community. Despite His Holiness's efforts in the last decade or so, to distance Himself from the political establishment in order to make the democratic values more sacrosanct, people still see him as not only their spiritual but their political leader too.

RELIGION

The role played by religion in coping with the helplessness and loss experienced in exile is unparalleled. Most of my informants found within religion the sacred space where they could reconcile their past suffering with their hope for the future. Religion performs even in the lay people, let alone the monks and nuns, its most traditional feature of acting as a consolidating factor to hold a culture together, of facilitating social inclusion and also of providing solace in times of unrest and distress.

One of my informants, aged 49, Sonam Chopheen, who has a handicrafts workshop where he works with the traditional Thangka paintings, spoke of the importance of religion in the lives of a people that had lost everything from their land, to their livelihood, often family members and their human rights and dignity. My second meeting with him revealed that as a young teen, both his parents had been shot dead by the CCP in front of him. He spoke about the incident in a matter of fact way and immediately added that the reason he journeyed into exile and has been able to deal with this loss and live a full life post that incident has been thanks to the blessings of His Holiness. In his narrative, the murky categories of religion and politics come together and he further claimed in a metonymic reconciliation that he has now adopted His Holiness as both his mother and father.

It seems it is impossible to divorce religion from politics in the case of the Tibetan people but this raises serious concerns given that the fall of the Tibetan empire in the 40s was due to their theocratic status and their informal political establishment that lacked the necessary will and aggression that geopolitics, especially in today's world requires. Also given that His Holiness is the sole person keeping the political and spiritual network tied together is worrisome given his old age.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE OF MEMORY

Concerning memory as such, it is to be noted that our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is casually connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present.

The way the diasporic Tibetan community experiences their lives in India is deeply connected to their lives in Tibet.

According to Connerton, it is an implicit rule that any social order must presuppose a shared memory. Members of a society can share neither experiences nor assumptions if their memories of the past diverge. It is in this way that images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present order. (Connerton, 1989, 3)

Concerning memory and its construction, it is also important to note here that many of the people I interviewed did not state the reason that they fled Tibet and came to India as political or religious but merely educational. Totalitarian regimes, such as the one administered by the Chinese government in Tibet, are horrifying not merely because of their violation of human rights and dignity but also because they create a fearful situation where nobody might remain as a witness to a people's past. The struggle against state power is also one against "forced forgetting" as Connerton argues and to survive as a witness to one's own ethnic past.

The systematic invasion of Tibet culturally hasn't stopped or deteriorated over the past five decades. After the second generation of Tibetans rose to revolt in 1987-88-89 (Gu-Chu-Sum), in the 90's there was the third generation of Tibetans that resisted what came to be known as "patriotic re-education" of the Tibetans. Many of the people interviewed had journeyed into exile during the time and due to this fact that they were being debarred from learning their own language. The younger ones as young as two or eight, some with their parents and quite often without were coming into exile because parents were fearful of the systematic amnesia being created by the Chinese regime. The Chinese government have for years been trying to concoct a historical reconstruction of Tibet which deems it as part of the Chinese 'motherland' and this is taught as a fact in schools in Tibet. Many of the people I interviewed named the reason for them having come to exile as the same. The Chinese authority through schools and other enforced institutions attempted to realign the Tibetan loyalties, to redefine their patriotism by teaching them mandarin and banning access to their own ethnicity by banning Tibetan-language based education. This fear of "forced forgetting" lead to the exile of many of the young and middle-aged Tibetans I met during my research.

Thus the paper argues that all the ways of assertion that are involved in the reproduction of Tibetan culture whether it is through education, martyrdom, food, cultural preservation, political assertion or any of the other means, they are all still based on the principle of memory. There is a deliberate sliding of the past into the present and through these manoeuvres the community manages to fight the systematic oppression of the Chinese oppression and the diffusion of Indian culture. The community practices remembering and re-remembering as a means of lending narrative continuity to their lives. Kundera, having lived and narrated many stories of exile and having manipulated the notion of the exile itself to attribute meaning to a life-time, writes about the delicate and incalculable feeling of living in a foreign country, "Being in a foreign country means walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his

family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood.” Marked by a troubled past, the cosmopolitan milieu of Delhi further vacuums out the foundation of the refugee’s identity. Memory and remembering enable social order in most communities but in the case of the Tibetan community in Majnu Ka Tilla, my observations revealed that memory, followed by hope, is the principle along which their every-day lives are weaved more intricately than other communities’. But given these successful institutions doesn’t negate the ongoing diffusion that their identity suffers from. It is inevitable to undergo change but my argument is that the struggle for freedom doesn’t just involve fighting the CCP but also involves resisting the feeling of being at home in India and to continue to identify as a ‘stranger’ or a ‘refugee’. Although the Government of India cannot deny Indian citizenship to most Tibetan refugees and a precedence has already been set for the same in the judicial system, most would rather go through the inconvenience of living as ‘Refugees’ or Foreign Nationals in the country because of the same reasons. The fight for freedom involves an internal fight of identification and that takes material form in the various ways mentioned above.

BILIOGRAPHY

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