

Navigating the Abyss: Understanding Statelessness, Exile, and Global Power Dynamics through the Lens of Tibet

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“Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about him”

- Thomas Merton

Abstract

Chinese Aggression in Tibet has made countless Tibetan peoples homeless and dead. After the downfall of Colonies, most of the world came under self-rule but there were several peoples who lost their identities. Tibet is one of them. Communist China invaded Tibet and made hundreds of thousands of Tibetans Stateless even in due course of time almost equal peoples lost their lives. China have almost destroyed cultural heritage of Tibet and have been trying to suppress the voice of Tibetan peoples all over the world.

Lack of efforts from International Organizations like United Nations, Amnesty International, Human rights watch, Civil rights defenders and UNHCR etc. have been matter of grave concern. The Dalai Lama was awarded The Nobel Peace Prize 1989 "for advocating peaceful solutions based upon tolerance and mutual respect in order to preserve the historical and cultural heritage of his people" but none of the organizations or States ever made effort to recognize Tibet as an independent state or tried to preserve the great Tibetan culture which have been continuously destroyed by the Chinese.

Keywords: Dalai Lama; CTA; Tibet; India; China.

Introduction

Tibet, a land steeped in antiquity and imbued with a rich cultural legacy stretching back millennia,¹ has endured a harrowing saga of oppression and displacement. The annals of Tibetan history bear witness to a profound upheaval precipitated by the incursion of Mao Zedong's forces in the mid-20th century, leading to the enforced exile of its spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and a significant portion of its populace.

Once an autonomous realm, Tibet's sovereignty was subjugated in 1951 with the coerced signing of the contentious 17-point agreement,² an act of geopolitical subjugation perpetrated upon Tibetan emissaries under duress.³ The ensuing years witnessed a ruthless campaign to suppress Tibetan identity and culture, reaching a nadir with the tragic events of March 1959, as the cobbled streets of Lhasa bore witness to a poignant display of defiance against Chinese hegemony. The response from the Chinese authorities was swift and merciless, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of Tibetan lives and the precipitous flight of the Dalai Lama.

On the 18th of April, 1959, in a momentous act of defiance against the coerced agreement and the oppressive regime, the Dalai Lama undertook a perilous journey into exile, seeking sanctuary in India. His exodus marked the commencement of a new epoch in Tibetan history, characterised by indomitable resolve, unwavering fortitude, and an unyielding quest for emancipation.⁴

The Dalai Lama's solitary pilgrimage was swiftly followed by an exodus of Tibetan refugees numbering in the hundreds of thousands, driven by an unquenchable thirst for religious and political autonomy. This mass exodus, among the largest in contemporary history, bears testimony to the profound upheaval and displacement wrought upon the Tibetan populace.⁵

However, the tribulations faced by Tibetan refugees in exile are manifold. The relentless pursuit of cultural homogenisation and territorial dominion by the Chinese regime has engendered a systematic campaign of oppression and persecution, with the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s serving as a nadir. During this dark epoch, thousands of monasteries were razed to the ground, and countless monks and nuns subjected to incarceration, torture, and disappearance.⁶

Yet, amidst the crucible of adversity, the Tibetan diaspora has remained resolute in its commitment to preserving its cultural heritage and pursuing justice for its people. In India and beyond, Tibetan refugees have forged vibrant communities, steadfast in their adherence to religious observance, cultural

traditions, and the solemn duty of educating future generations about the plight of their homeland.

The exile of the Tibetan people stands as a poignant testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unyielding oppression. It is a saga of endurance, sacrifice, and unwavering resolve in the pursuit of liberty and justice. As the Tibetan diaspora continues to proliferate across the global landscape, their voices resonate with greater resonance, their cause assumes greater urgency, and their aspiration for a free Tibet burns ever brighter.

Waves of Tibetan Refugees Since 1959

The history of Tibetan displacement since 1959 encompasses distinct waves, each representing a chapter in the enduring struggle for Tibetan autonomy and human rights. These waves reveal the resilience of a people determined to preserve their cultural heritage and secure a brighter future amidst adversity.

First Wave: The origins of the Tibetan diaspora can be traced back to the tragic events of March 1959, when the Chinese military brutally suppressed dissent in Lhasa, resulting in the massacre of tens of thousands of Tibetans. This grievous act served as the catalyst for the first wave of refugees fleeing into India. Among them was His Holiness the Dalai Lama, compelled to seek refuge in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. Accompanying him were hundreds of thousands of Tibetans, driven by a profound desire to follow their spiritual and political leader into exile. Some sought sanctuary in neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan. This initial influx of Tibetan refugees into India continues to this day, with an estimated 1,000 to 2,500 individuals seeking asylum annually. Their presence in the region served as a powerful indictment of the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese authorities in Tibet, a fact acknowledged by a United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1961.⁷

Second Wave: The second wave of Tibetan exodus was precipitated by a further escalation of political repression in Tibet following the liberalisation of tourism

and trade in the region. Between 1980 and 2009, the number of Tibetan refugees registering at the Dharamshala reception centre of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) swelled to over 87,000. However, nearly half of these individuals eventually returned to Tibet after completing their pilgrimage. Those who remained in India often comprised children seeking refuge in the Tibetan Children's Village school, an integrated community providing care and education for orphans, destitute, and refugee children from Tibet.⁸

Third Wave: The most recent wave of Tibetan refugees can be attributed to the escalation of tensions surrounding the Beijing Olympics, particularly the Lhasa incident in which Tibetan protestors voiced their opposition to the event.⁹ In response, the Chinese government employed heavy-handed tactics to quell dissent, including the use of force, mass arrests, and detention. Furthermore, reports emerged of Tibetan refugees facing abuse and harassment, including sexual assault, at the hands of Nepali security forces along the borders.¹⁰ Despite these challenges, an average of 4,000 to 5,000 Tibetans continues to arrive in Dharamshala annually, underscoring the enduring determination of the Tibetan people to seek freedom and justice in the face of adversity.¹¹

The waves of Tibetan refugees since 1959 stand as a testament to the resilience and fortitude of a people subjected to systemic oppression and persecution. Their journey into exile embodies a quest for dignity, freedom, and self-determination, perpetuated by the enduring hope of one day returning to their ancestral homeland.

The Tibet Factor in India-China Relations: A Theoretical Perspective

In analysing the Tibet factor within the broader context of Sino-Indian relations, scholars often turn to various theoretical frameworks in international relations (IR) to provide insight into the dynamics at play. One such theoretical approach is Realism, which posits that states primarily pursue their own self-interests in an anarchic international system characterized by competition and power struggles.

From a Realist perspective, the incorporation of Tibet into China's sphere of influence represents a strategic move aimed at consolidating power and expanding China's territorial control. China's assertive posture in Tibet, including its military buildup and infrastructure development along the border with India, can be interpreted as manifestations of its quest for regional dominance and security.

In response, India's approach to Tibet is driven by its own security imperatives and concerns about China's intentions. India perceives the presence of Chinese military forces in Tibet as a potential threat to its territorial integrity and national security, prompting it to adopt a cautious and vigilant stance vis-à-vis China.

Moreover, Realist scholars argue that the Tibet issue exacerbates existing power asymmetries between India and China, contributing to a security dilemma characterized by mutual mistrust and suspicion. As both countries seek to enhance their military capabilities and assert their dominance in the region, the risk of conflict escalation remains a persistent concern.

Alternatively, Constructivist theorists highlight the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour and international relations. From a Constructivist perspective, the Tibet factor in Sino-Indian relations is not merely a question of power politics but also reflects deeper cultural, historical, and ideological dimensions.

Central to the Constructivist analysis is the notion of national identity and how it informs state actions and perceptions. In the case of India, the historical and cultural ties with Tibet, as well as the shared values of democracy and pluralism, contribute to a sense of solidarity and empathy towards the Tibetan cause. India's support for the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama can thus be understood as expressions of its commitment to human rights and democracy.

Conversely, China's rigid adherence to the principle of territorial integrity and its suppression of Tibetan dissent stem from its own national identity

narratives, which emphasize unity, stability, and sovereignty. From a Constructivist perspective, the Tibet issue represents a clash of competing identities and narratives, wherein the interests and values of both India and China are deeply entrenched.

The Tibet factor in Sino-Indian relations can be elucidated through the lens of various theoretical approaches in international relations. Whether viewed through the prism of Realism or Constructivism, the Tibet issue underscores the complexities and nuances of state behaviour and the intricate interplay of power, identity, and ideology in shaping interstate relations in the contemporary world.

CTA and the Government in Exile

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), also known as the Tibetan Government in Exile, was founded on May 29, 2011, following His Holiness the Dalai Lama's decision to step back from the movement for Tibetan independence. This pivotal moment prompted the CTA to undergo significant institutional reforms.

With the Dalai Lama's withdrawal from political leadership, the CTA embarked on a process of re-evaluation, nullifying articles that outlined the Dalai Lama's roles and responsibilities as the leader and regent, as initially enshrined in Kashang upon the administration's re-establishment in 1959. This marked a profound shift in the governance structure of the Tibetan diaspora, symbolising a transition towards greater institutional autonomy and democratic governance.¹²

The establishment of the CTA as the Tibetan Government in Exile heralds a new chapter in the Tibetan struggle for autonomy and self-determination. Embracing democratic principles and inclusive governance, the CTA is entrusted with representing the interests of the Tibetan people both within India and on the global stage.

Under the leadership of the Sikyong, the CTA continues to advocate for the rights and welfare of Tibetan refugees while also engaging in dialogue and diplomacy to promote Tibetan autonomy. Through its commitment to democratic values and transparent governance, the CTA seeks to uphold the aspirations of the Tibetan people and pave the way for a peaceful and sustainable resolution to the Tibetan issue.

In essence, the CTA and the Government in Exile embody Tibetan resilience and determination in the face of adversity. As Tibetans navigate the complexities of exile, the CTA serves as a beacon of hope and a testament to the enduring spirit of the Tibetan people.

Tibetan Settlements and Population in India

Since the onset of their exile, Tibetan refugees have sought refuge and established vibrant communities across India. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have made India their home, embracing a life free from fear or threat. Despite India's subsequent recognition of Tibet as part of China, it has never compelled Tibetan citizens to return or branded them as illegal immigrants. This accommodating stance has enabled Tibetan people to flourish in India, under the guidance of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), headquartered in McLeodganj, Dharamshala.¹³

The CTA serves as the cornerstone of Tibetan governance in exile, overseeing the affairs of the Tibetan diaspora worldwide. In addition to its central office in Dharamshala, the CTA maintains representation in ten countries, effectively acting as de facto embassies or consular offices for Tibetans. These offices, located in New Delhi, New York, Geneva, Tokyo, London, Canberra, Moscow, Pretoria, and Taipei,¹⁴ provide essential services and support to Tibetan communities dispersed across the globe.

Collaborating closely with the Government of India, the CTA manages the welfare and interests of Tibetan refugees, fostering strong ties with Indian authorities while also engaging with Tibetan communities in numerous other countries. These efforts have garnered international recognition, with CTA

leaders being invited to the White House after years of persistent advocacy and diplomacy.

Despite the relative stability of their lives in India, Tibetan refugees remain deeply connected to the homeland they left behind. Even His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, relinquished his formal leadership role in 2014, paving the way for the CTA to assume greater administrative responsibilities. This transition marked the formal establishment of the Tibetan Government in Exile in India, with the Sikyong assuming leadership in the absence of the Dalai Lama's direct political authority.

In essence, Tibetan settlements in India epitomise resilience, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to preserving Tibetan culture and identity in the face of adversity. While physically distant from their ancestral homeland, the spirit of Tibetans in India remains unyielding, sustained by a deep-seated hope for a peaceful resolution to the Tibetan struggle and a longing for the day when they can return to a free and autonomous Tibet.

Foreigners or Non-Citizens?

The treatment of Tibetan refugees in India raises questions about their legal status and the nature of their relationship with the hosting country. Prior to 1980, Tibetan refugees in India were afforded certain privileges, including residency permits and even citizenship. However, following the second wave of exile in 1980, the situation changed, with Tibetan refugees facing greater challenges in obtaining similar rights and recognition.¹⁵

This shift in policy can be attributed to a combination of factors, including Chinese pressure and the evolving dynamics of India's foreign relations. The refusal to recognize Tibet as an independent entity has had implications for the legal status of Tibetan refugees in India. While those who arrived before 1980 were granted residency permits and citizenship, subsequent arrivals have not received the same level of recognition.¹⁶

Instead, Tibetan refugees who arrived after 1980 are often classified as "pilgrims" rather than officially recognized as refugees. This distinction raises questions about their legal rights and protections under international law. By categorizing Tibetan refugees as pilgrims rather than refugees, India may be avoiding contentious diplomatic issues with China regarding the recognition of Tibet as a distinct political entity.¹⁷

However, this classification also raises concerns about the legal status and rights of Tibetan refugees in India. Without formal refugee status, Tibetan refugees may be denied access to essential services and protections guaranteed under international refugee law. Furthermore, their status as "pilgrims" may limit their ability to work, access education, and participate fully in Indian society.¹⁸

The treatment of Tibetan refugees in India raises important questions about their legal status and rights as non-citizens. By categorizing them as "pilgrims" rather than refugees, India may be sidestepping diplomatic challenges with China, but it also risks denying Tibetan refugees the protections and rights they are entitled to under international law. Further research is needed to explore the implications of this classification and identify potential solutions to ensure the full rights and recognition of Tibetan refugees in India.

Limitations: A Multifaceted Examination

The saga of Tibetan refugees in India unfolds as a compelling narrative of resilience amidst adversity, punctuated by a labyrinth of challenges that test their resolve and fortitude. In this discourse, we delve into the multifaceted dimensions of their experiences, juxtaposing personal triumphs with collective struggles and reflecting on the ethical imperatives within the realm of international relations (IR).

Lhasang Tsering's poignant contemplation encapsulates the dichotomy faced by Tibetan exiles, who straddle the realms of individual success and communal aspirations for freedom. Their journey embodies a poignant narrative of dual identities, where personal accomplishments are juxtaposed with the enduring

quest for the emancipation of their homeland, evoking profound ethical considerations within the context of IR.

Central to this discourse is the pervasive challenge of unemployment that plagues Tibetan communities, exacerbated by bureaucratic barriers and discriminatory employment practices. Denied the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the socio-economic fabric of their host country, Tibetan refugees find themselves marginalized and disenfranchised, prompting a critical examination of ethical responsibilities within the global community.

Once the backbone of livelihoods, agriculture now stands besieged by infrastructural deficiencies and environmental constraints, compelling Tibetans to seek alternative avenues of sustenance. Venturing into the sweater trade, they navigate the vagaries of a seasonal market, grappling with uncertainty and instability, while ethical questions surrounding economic justice and fair trade loom large.

Meanwhile, initiatives aimed at preserving Tibetan culture and tradition through handicrafts face economic realities that challenge their sustainability. Despite aspirations to empower Tibetan artisans, the erosion of cultural heritage in the face of economic exigencies prompts introspection on the ethical imperative of cultural preservation within the broader discourse of human rights and cultural diversity.

Against this backdrop, a wave of migration sweeps through Tibetan settlements, as younger generations seek opportunities for economic prosperity and social mobility in urban landscapes. Their exodus underscores the ethical imperative of addressing systemic inequalities and structural barriers that hinder their socio-economic integration and inhibit the realization of their full potential.

The plight of Tibetan refugees in India serves as a poignant reminder of the ethical complexities inherent in the realm of international relations. As we navigate the intricate tapestry of their experiences, it becomes imperative to uphold principles of justice, equity, and human dignity, fostering a future

where Tibetan refugees can flourish and thrive, unencumbered by the burdens of displacement and marginalization.

India's Tibet Policy

India's approach towards Tibet has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, geopolitical, and ideological factors, with ramifications that extend far beyond its borders. Embedded within this narrative is a tale of missed opportunities, strategic miscalculations, and the enduring legacy of colonial rivalries.

The genesis of India's Tibet policy can be traced back to the era of the British Empire, where the geopolitical chessboard was defined by the Great Game – a contest for influence and supremacy between the British and Russian Empires in Central Asia. Fearing Russian expansionism, the British sought to secure their northern frontier through the formation of strategic buffers such as the Durand Line and the Wakhan Corridor, with Tibet emerging as a pivotal pawn in this geopolitical gambit.¹⁹

As the British vied for control over Tibet to thwart Russian encroachment, India found itself entangled in a web of colonial machinations that dictated its foreign policy trajectory. Despite numerous rebellions and revolutions in the Asian theater, the British steadfastly guarded their imperial interests, ensuring that Tibet remained within their sphere of influence until the waning days of colonial rule.²⁰

However, with the dawn of Indian independence, the dynamics of regional power politics underwent a seismic shift, as Nehruvian idealism supplanted realpolitik in shaping India's foreign policy towards China. Nehru's visionary zeal for fostering amicable relations with China, coupled with his ideological affinity for the nascent communist state, resulted in strategic myopia that failed to recognize the strategic significance of Tibet as a buffer state.²¹

India's failure to assert its interests in Tibet paved the way for China's annexation of the region, along with territorial incursions into Aksai Chin and

parts of Arunachal Pradesh. While India espoused a doctrine of diplomacy and soft power in its dealings with China, Beijing responded with unwavering assertiveness, leveraging hard power to consolidate its territorial gains and undermine India's strategic interests.

In the annals of history, India's Tibet policy stands as a cautionary tale of strategic miscalculation and missed opportunities. Despite the exodus of Tibetan refugees to India, their plight remains a poignant reminder of the failure of successive Indian leaderships to champion their cause and uphold the principles of justice and human rights.

As Tibetans languish in exile, their shattered dreams of returning to their ancestral homeland serve as a poignant emblem of the tragic consequences of geopolitical expediency and ideological fervour. In the crucible of India's Tibet policy, the echoes of history reverberate – a sobering testament to the enduring complexities of international relations and the indelible imprint of past decisions on the fate of nations.

UN and Other State Actors: A Realist Analysis

Amidst the turbulence gripping Europe, particularly the Russia-Ukraine conflict, questions arise regarding the efficacy of international bodies such as the United Nations, European Union, and NATO. Despite their lofty mandates, these organisations have often faltered in the face of crises, be it the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, the protracted civil war in Syria, or the seismic shifts of the Arab Spring.

From a realist perspective, the shortcomings of international organisations in addressing crises like the Tibetan predicament can be attributed to the inherent constraints of the anarchic international system. States, driven by self-interest and power dynamics, prioritize their own security and economic interests over humanitarian concerns. In this context, the rise of China as a formidable economic powerhouse has reshaped the geopolitical landscape, compelling states to tread cautiously in their dealings with Beijing.

The United Nations, through resolutions like 1353 (XIV)²² and 1723 (XVI),²³ has decried the egregious violations of human rights in Tibet and acknowledged the plight of Tibetan refugees in neighbouring nations. Yet, despite such declarations, tangible actions to alleviate these dire circumstances have remained conspicuously absent. Even high-profile gestures, such as invitations extended to the Dalai Lama and the President of the Central Tibetan Administration by the White House, have failed to materialise into substantive interventions for Tibetans.²⁴

The global economic landscape further complicates matters, with China's ascendancy as a preeminent economic powerhouse. The allure of Chinese investment has left many nations wary of engaging in economic standoffs with Beijing, thereby granting China significant sway on the world stage. This strategic maneuvering underscores a harsh reality: in the face of economic might, democratic principles and human rights often take a backseat, leaving smaller economies marginalized.²⁵

In essence, the shortcomings of international organisations and state actors in addressing the Tibetan predicament underscore broader systemic deficiencies in the global response to human rights abuses and geopolitical crises. As democracies grapple with the challenge of balancing economic imperatives with moral obligations, the plight of marginalized populations like the Tibetan people serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle for justice and dignity in an increasingly complex world.

Conclusion

The plight of statelessness, as outlined in Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, remains a pressing issue that continues to affect millions worldwide. Despite the existence of numerous treaties and conventions aimed at addressing this crisis, statelessness persists, perpetuating the marginalization and vulnerability of countless individuals.

Defined by the UNHCR as the condition of not being considered a national by any state under its laws, statelessness can manifest in both *de jure* and *de facto*

forms. While *de jure* statelessness is rooted in legal frameworks, *de facto* statelessness arises from the denial of citizenship rights and protections by governments.²⁶

Yet, amidst this tragedy, tales of exile also reveal narratives of resilience and fortitude. For many, exile represents a forced departure from one's homeland – a painful rupture from roots and identity. However, it also embodies the indomitable human spirit, wherein individuals and communities find strength in adversity, forging new lives in unfamiliar lands.

The stories of Israel and Tibet serve as poignant examples of this resilience. While the Jewish people endured centuries of exile and persecution before reclaiming their ancestral homeland, the Tibetan experience is marked by a unique blend of cultural heritage and spiritual resilience. Despite their distinct paths, both communities epitomize the enduring human capacity for survival and adaptation in the face of adversity.

As we reflect on these narratives, we are reminded of the interconnectedness of humanity and the shared quest for dignity and belonging. It is incumbent upon the international community to redouble its efforts to address the root causes of statelessness, safeguarding the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their nationality or circumstance.

Furthermore, the research question posited earlier prompts us to critically examine China's role as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council in addressing the plight of the Tibetan people. Given its influential position on the global stage, China's response to the Tibetan question holds significant implications for international efforts to promote justice and human rights. By exploring China's approach to this issue, we can gain valuable insights into the complexities of great power politics and the challenges of upholding humanitarian principles within the framework of international institutions.

Ultimately, only through collective action and solidarity can we ensure a world where every individual can claim their rightful place in society, free from the spectre of statelessness and exile.

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