

Empowerment and Marginalisation of Tibetan Women in India

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This research paper seeks to focus on the irony of the “refugee construct” and its application to the Tibetan women refugees in India. This paper addresses the multidimensional issues and concerns of Tibetan women in exile. In the more than fifty years of exile, Tibetan women have encountered the struggles that their male counterparts experience. In addition, they have also experienced both empowerment as well as marginality in exile. From our conversations with Tibetan women of different generations, our interactions with members of Tibetan Women’s Association, and a perusal of written literature, we have attempted to understand the varied nuances of Tibetan women’s experience of their refugee status.

[Key Words: Empowerment, political assertion, refugee, marginalisation]

The axial focus of the paper is on the irony of the “refugee construct” and its application to the Tibetan women refugees in India. After the People’s Republic Army of China occupied Tibet in 1950, in March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso took refuge in India. The subsequent genocide and the Cultural Revolution that occurred a decade later saw an exodus of Tibetans fleeing to India and Nepal as refugees.

From their perilous flight into India since 1959 with their scant belongings, the Tibetan refugees in India are today recognised as one of the most successful refugee communities in the world. A lot of focus, administrative as well as academic, has been on capturing their success in exile, as well as their attempts to continue their freedom struggle. With the spotlight on the above issues, scant attention has been given to struggles of Tibetan women in exile. This paper seeks to address this lacuna.

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‘ARMED’ Conflict and The Birth Of Tibetan Refugees

The twentieth century was the most murderous in recorded history (Hobsbawm 2001). It was a century of almost unbroken war, with a few and brief periods without organised armed conflict somewhere. Not surprisingly

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

The South Asian region hosts the largest number of refugees on the globe. Historically, South Asia has witnessed substantial intra-regional movement and dislocation of regional groups fleeing ethnic or religious persecution and political instability (Chari *et al*: 2003). The heightened armed conflict within the region on account of various political, economic, ethnic, and religious factors led to an exodus of populations, which have often been absorbed within the region itself.

Our paper is concerned with the aftermath of one such armed conflict that the twentieth century had witnessed: A conflict that was at the same time armed as well as an ideological. The virulent antagonism between the armed communist Chinese and the technologically primitive, deeply religious, largely nonviolent Tibetan Buddhists in the mid twentieth century led to the Tibetans fleeing Tibet as refugees.

Of the millions that have fled their homeland, seeking refuge and a new life in host societies the world over, the Tibetans stand out. They have taken refuge in a neighbouring country which has traditionally been their spiritual guru. After China occupied/liberated Tibet in 1949, in 1950 the People's Republic Army of China, marched into and occupied Tibet. For nine years there were fruitless attempts at negotiations between the Governments of China and Tibet. In March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled to India. Following the Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans fled to India as refugees. The subsequent genocide, and the Cultural Revolution that took place a decade later, saw an exodus of Tibetans fleeing to India and Nepal as refugees.

When a symbiotic national community with specific political and geo-cultural boundaries gets dismantled, it leads to the collective construction of a sense of community among the members of the former national community. Soon after arriving in exile, the Dalai Lama with the support of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), as well as the Indian Government and civil society, soon got on with the task of the creation and sustenance of a unified Tibetan community in the face of disparity with regard to the Tibetan populace. Through their participation in imagining and creation of the cultural and moral cores of their community, the refugees develop a sense of collective identity. The Tibetan administration has been successful in instilling in the refugee

Tibetans not just a sense of ‘Tibetannes’, but has managed to bring about economic advancement and an improvement in the life of the Tibetan refugees.

From their perilous flight into India with their scant belongings, the Tibetan refugees are recognised as one of the most successful refugee communities today. A lot of focus, administrative as well as academic, has been on capturing their success in exile, as well as their attempts to continue their freedom struggle. With the spotlight on the above issues, scant attention has been given to struggles of Tibetan women in exile. But this neglect of gender in refugee studies is not limited to the Tibetan case. Although eighty percent of the world’s refugee population are women and children the world over, the emphasis in refugee studies, policies and perspectives, has been male centric. The 1951 Refugee Conventions and international laws and domestic policies concerning refugees have until recently been gender blind. Refugee women continue to be discriminated against in situations of armed conflict, in the diaspora, and in resettlement because of their gender. This paper seeks to address this lacuna. The axial focus of the paper is on the irony of the “refugee construct” and its application to the Tibetan women in India.

Status of Women in Pre Modern Tibet

Historicising Tibet can be a confusing endeavour, largely due to the burden of maintaining the image of a Shangri-La, a region that practiced the egalitarian and ethical teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet’s relative isolation from the rest of the world until the Chinese armed aggression in 1959 was also another reason for the scarcity of reliable secondary data. Hence, there are conflicting views on the status of Tibetan women prior to their exile. A number of studies claim that women enjoyed a remarkably high position in Tibetan society as compared to their counterparts in other Asian societies (Chodon 2007). Writing in *The People of Tibet*, Charles Bell (1928) noted:

“When a traveller enters Tibet from neighbouring China or India, few things impress him more vigorously or more deeply than the position of the Tibetan women. They are not kept in seclusion, as are Indian women. Accustomed to mix with the other sex throughout their lives, they are at ease with men, and can hold their own as well as any women in the world. There were regional differences, in the treatment of women. Also being a deeply religious society and being relatively isolated from the world, modern education and democratic participation was unknown to them.”

Scholars have credited Tibetan Buddhism for the elevated status of women in Tibet. Yet, some studies also show that there is a discrepancy between the Buddhist values pertaining to treatment of women and the actual practice pertaining to treatment and status of women in society. Language often reflects the gender bias of a society. Tibetan language illustrates the perception of a woman’s position and her role in society. The most common terms for woman is *Kyemen*(inferior birth) and *tsamdenma*(she who has limitations).

Though they may have been considered inferior to men, unlike their counterparts in other parts of Asia, Tibetan women were not limited to just the

confines of their homes. There are written records that document the political participation of women, which increased dramatically, when the Chinese Government instituted the first Tibetan women's patriotic organisation in the early 1950s. On March 8, 1953 the Chinese Government formed the Lhasa Patriotic Women's Association. Various other women's organisations were established in Tibet during the next few years. The Chinese established these Women's organisations as a support group that would be pro Chinese and whom they could influence. But as Chinese atrocities in Tibet escalated, some Tibetans belonging to these Women's organisations, mobilised themselves to protest against Chinese aggression.

The main concerns of the Tibetan women's organisations were the protection of the Dalai Lama, and the preservation of Tibetan culture. In the days leading up to the Tibetan Uprising of 10 March 1959, these women's organisation got more proactive. In a celebration called by the Chinese to celebrate the anniversary of PWA on March 8 1959, several Tibetan women shouted anti-Chinese slogans. On March 12 three thousand Tibetan women gathered outside the Potala Palace where they passed a resolution asking the Chinese to leave Tibet. They then marched on the streets of Lhasa raising anti-Chinese slogans, and went to each of the Foreign missions in Lhasa, including the Indian mission, requesting their Government's support in expelling the Chinese. Chinese repercussions were quick, and a large number of Tibetan women were subsequently publicly executed.

Thus, on the whole, women in pre modern Tibet experienced quite a broad range of freedom, while there were also restrictions related to gender, and that these tended to vary according to region, occupation, and class (Butler 2003).

These experiences influenced how Tibetan women refugees responded to their situation in exile once they fled to India.

Tibetan Women in Exile

The persecution and alienation that defines the woman refugee, both in her home and host country, give the impression that she is condemned to dictates beyond her control. While the refugees are victims of statecraft and the discursive power of nationalism and human rights, they are at the same time active agents of social transformation (Bose 1997). The Tibetan women refugees in India have tried counter the experiences of loss, marginality, and displacement by proactively using their agency to give voice to their aspirations and improve their life conditions. From my conversations with Tibetan women of different generations, my interactions with members of Tibetan Women's Association, both at the head office in Dharamshala, and the Karnataka Chapter, as well as various secondary sources, I have attempted to understand Tibetan women's experience of their refugee status.

The issues and concerns of the women in exile are multidimensional. While a pattern of denying women their basic rights in a refugee-producing home country tends to replicate itself in the community-in-exile, Tibetan

refugee women have used their exile to empower themselves. The refugee status has been described as the "autonomous right to disengage from an abusive society and to seek protection abroad (Hathaway 1993)". Refugee status can therefore be seen as a tool of empowerment for women refugees if they are fleeing for the same reasons as men refugees. The progress made by the Tibetan women refugees, in many ways, reflects the success story of Tibetan refugees in general.

Economic Empowerment

While in many refugee communities, women experience higher rates of unemployment than men, among the Tibetans in India, occupational disparity between the sexes is minimal. In many refugee communities, the cultural and educational handicaps that accompany women refugees, such as illiteracy and little or no previous employment experience, hampers the employability potential and advancement of women refugees. But the thousands of Tibetan women engaged in seasonal occupation like sweater and jewellery selling attest that prior handicaps are not a hindrance to their ability to find employment. In fact, seasonal business of sweater and jewellery selling is one of the major occupations of Tibetans in exile. This occupation of sweater selling is a consequence of the exile situation. When the Tibetans arrived in India, most of them were given jobs as road construction workers in the high altitude regions of Northern India. As the conditions surrounding this job were fraught with danger and difficulty, the Tibetans were later relocated to various settlements throughout India. Most of these settlements were predominantly agricultural. As they began to learn and practice agriculture, Tibetans took up sweater selling to supplement their income. Initially the Tibetan women knitted the sweaters at their homes and these were sold by Tibetan men to various places in India. Later, realising the profitability of this business, Tibetans began buying sweaters from Merchants in Punjab, especially Ludhiana, and selling these sweaters throughout the country. A bulk of these sweater sellers have been women. As the Tibetan women practice this seasonal occupation of sweater selling as well as jewellery selling, their menfolk stay back in the settlements to take care of their children. And if the husband joins the wife to help her in the business, then the children are put either in boarding schools like, Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) or they are taken care of by the elderly at home. This seasonal occupation of the Tibetan women has changed the family dynamics in their exile homes.

Due to the facilities of modern education, the support of the Indian Government, and the support of the CTA in the form of scholarships, and other facilities, Tibetan women are now getting educated and seeking a wide variety of occupations. The transformation of the Tibetan society from nomadic herding to cultivation, handicraft business, and education has opened new vistas for Tibetan women (Rajput 2012). The economic empowerment of women in exile has socio cultural consequences. Many of the households are now headed by women. Unlike in pre exile Tibet, where there was a marked preference for a

male child, among the refugees, a female child is considered an asset. The common belief among refugee women is that it is the girl child who will earn and take care of the elderly parents. Thus Tibetan women in exile are financially empowered. This empowerment also affects the marriage scenario, as there is no pressure on the women to get married as well. Late marriages are becoming increasingly common.

Political Assertion

Tibetan women are also politically assertive in exile. As mentioned earlier, Tibetan women were politically active even prior to their exile. But this assertiveness and articulation in the political sphere has only grown in exile. The Constitution framed in exile proclaims equality between the sexes. The Tibetan- Government- in -Exile is an example of direct democracy with democratic decentralization permeating right to the grassroots. Tibetan women are politically active in governance right from the level of the neighbourhood camps in the settlement up to the highest level in the Tibetan *Kashag* (Parliament). Tibetan women also prominently feature in almost all Tibetan protest movements and other political mobilisations. They are also part of various Tibetan organisations. The Tibetan Women's Association is the second largest Tibetan NGO in exile with fifty six chapters all across the world.

Tibetan women in exile play an important role in the freedom struggle while in exile. The Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), the only organisation of Tibetan women in exile, represents this political assertion of the Tibetan women. Founded in 1959, during the Lhasa uprising, it was re-established in exile in 1984. Currently the TWA has fifty six regional chapters the world over and seventeen thousand members. Since they are the only women NGO, besides being politically involved on various national or international levels, we also speak on domestic violence or human rights recovery, faced by the Tibetan women inside Tibet and also in the exile community. The TWA also has various projects like the 'Stitches of Tibet' project and the Fellowship project, which focus on training and empowering Tibetan women.

Thus Tibetan women refugees in India have used their agency along with a facilitating environment to become economically empowered and politically assertive in exile. But these achievements do not tell the entire story of Tibetan women in exile. In fact, ironically, these positive indices may facilitate to block and suppress the multiple marginalisations that Tibetan women face in refuge. Placing national identity over gender identity, the Tibetan community in exile downplays any gender violations that may distract from the larger 'Tibetan struggle'.

Issues That Cast A Shadow Over The Empowerment Of Tibetan Women

What happens when Tibetan women loyal to their community desire subjectivities not endorsed by the exile government? What happens when the aspirations of Tibetan women go beyond the welfare of their families, their communities and their cause? This section highlights some issues that need to be addressed to ensure the real empowerment of Tibetan women in India.

Gendered division of labour

In the aftermath of the flight of almost lakhs Tibetan refugees into India, the sustenance, reconstruction and rehabilitation of the community was the topmost priority. However, division of labour and roles quickly became gendered. Elite men handled external work involving political advocacy and securing aid in the international arena, while the women busied themselves in the domestic arena as caregivers—to ensure the survival of high numbers of orphaned Tibetan children. This gendered division of labour has conditioned the thinking of Tibetan of the Tibetan exile community into what is ‘accepted’ roles for men and women.

Although CTA’s promotion of education was, in McGranahan’s (2010); words, “not gendered male or female in exile (Norbu 1994) prevailing belief in traditional gender roles kept a large number of exile Tibetan girls from accessing education—especially in poor rural Tibetan communities (Lokyitsang 2015).

Paucity of Women leaders

While Tibetan women have been politically active, and are members of various political, social as well as governmental bodies, there are not many women leaders. Though the Tibetans in exile practice direct democracy, there is gender disparity at all levels of governance. Women are missing in decision-making bodies. They remain stuck in gender-stereotypical roles.

Abuse: Physical, Emotional and Sexual

A much larger issue haunting the Tibetan women refugees in India is the question of abuse. While a large number of Tibetans have suffered from some form of abuse or the other in exile, Tibetan women are victims of additional abuse on account of their gender. Gender, religion, patriarchy and refugee status - all combined to form a cocktail that has been, at times, oppressive and abusive towards women. Right from the moment of fleeing their county to their resettlement in the host country, Tibetans are vulnerable to abuse. During their flight, a major source of fear for the Tibetan refugees is capture and torture by the Chinese soldiers. Tibetan women refugees face the additional danger of molestation and rape by Chinese soldiers. There have been documented accounts of Tibetan women, being raped by not only Chinese soldiers in captivity, but also being gang raped by Nepalese soldiers while they are en route to India. Fears of being deported to Tibet, these women do not complain about the abuse.

Once they arrived in India, while the fear of losing their life disappeared, Tibetan women still carried the vulnerability of being associated with their gender. Especially in the construction camps, women were subject to the gaze of Indian men, and a number of them were even propositioned from time to time. As a way of protecting themselves against this vulnerability and insecurity, Tibetans entered into unusual marriage alliances. While polyandry was practiced in Tibet, in exile it was used as a tool to keep the community

knitted together. This ensured protection against abuse by an alien country. This is one reason also why a number of nuns and monks gave up their vows in exile.

One fallout of fleeing one's country as refugees is the lack of documents and certificates. Tibetans lack birth certificates, marriage certificates and death certificates. This then becomes an impediment in registering marriages. Hence a large number of Tibetan marriages are unregistered. Not registering their marriage also makes it easy for a marriage to break up. This trend is increasing about young Tibetan refugees, especially if one of the partners goes abroad. This situation leaves the women more vulnerable, as it is usually the woman who is left behind with the children. In 2014, the TWA prepared a report on the legal empowerment of Tibetan women in exile in India. In this report they narrated a case wherein a man had abandoned his wife. When she approached the local Tibetan leaders they punished her husband by making him prostrate 1000 times-a way to cleanse his sin and ordered him to pay her 35,000 Indian rupees. She said it was "outrageous" as this money was suppose to last till her son turns 18 which means for another five years.

Tibetans also face abuse from within the community. In July 2011, a Tibetan woman had been beaten, stripped naked and taken to the market by fellow Tibetans in Tenzinghang, a Tibetan settlement in Arunachal Pradesh. TWA dispatched several Tibetan women from Dharamsala to investigate the incident. The CTA remained silent on the issue.

This silence is the chosen stance of the CTA on several issues concerning women's abuse by the Tibetan community in exile. For instance, the report produced by the Social and Resource Development Fund of the CTA as part of the CTA's Women's Empowerment Program (WEP), deals with various aspects pertaining to women refugees in exile but there is very little data on physical and sexual abuse within the community. In personal interviews and interactions, we have also found that the Tibetan community, including women as well as Tibetan Women's Association, glosses over issues of domestic violence, rape, and other forms of physical and sexual abuse. The very few Tibetan women, who have brought these issues in the public domain, have had to face a lot of opposition from their community. They were accused of trying to divide the community, of distracting attention from the struggle. It is cultural and social norms such as these, which silence the voices of many brave and abused Tibetans. This hiding-under-the-carpet attitude of the Tibetan community in exile has meant that there is no proper NGO that exclusively addresses the need of women abused in the community. While the Government still pursues an Ostrich's approach towards gender abuse in the community, many transnational networks of Tibetans in the diaspora, especially women are now opening up and taking up this cause. The large number of Tibetan men who have responded negatively to public conversation on gender violence have largely dismissed the issue by falsely concluding Tibetan society as having always been a gender equal society, or accusing women advocates of trying to

emulate western concepts of modernity by taking on western feminist ideologies.

While the CTA, including its Prime Minister, Dr Lobsang Sangay encourages women empowerment, it is reluctant to engage seriously with issues concerning gender abuse, often considering it a non-issue. One Tibetan activist gives her reason for this Governmental hesitance: “The reason, I believe, is that an official response would be an admission that Tibetans have all the same failings as every other human community. Unfortunately, we are so invested in preserving a certain image that we’ve become willing to hide any truth to protect it, and the victims of violence are paying the price.”

Conclusion

This paper addresses the multidimensional issues and concerns of Tibetan women in exile. The Tibetan women refugees in India have tried to counter the experiences of loss, marginality, and displacement by proactively become agents of social transformation by giving voice to their aspirations and improving their life conditions. They have used their agency, along with a facilitating environment, to become economically empowered and politically assertive in exile. While a pattern of denying women their basic rights in a refugee-producing home country tends to replicate itself in the community-in-exile, Tibetan refugee women have used their exile to empower themselves.

But these achievements do not tell the entire story of Tibetan women in exile. In fact, ironically, these positive indices may facilitate to block and suppress the multiple marginalisations that Tibetan women refugees face. They are marginalized first as refugees and also as women. But their marginalisation goes further. They are also marginalised their own community if they protest against abuse and violence meted out by members of the community. Ironically, in the process of sustaining the Tibetan struggle, in protesting against the violence and abuse of the Chinese, the Tibetan women in exile, are expected to swallow their personal abuse and struggle. Placing national identity over gender identity, the Tibetan community in exile downplays any gender violations that may distract from the larger ‘Tibetan struggle’.

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