

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR TIBETAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the challenges faced by Tibetan refugee children in navigating their new lives in India, drawing on their memories of escape from Tibet, contact with families, and restarting their lives afresh in an alien land, with a particular focus on their education. The paper draws on a core part of a wider research framework undertaken in 2023 on Tibetan refugee youth in New Delhi, "Negotiating Everyday Life in a City of Refuge: Experience of Tibetan Youth in New Delhi, India" by Kunjal Gawas. The wider research covers various facets of the challenges faced by Tibetan youth in India in terms of their access to gainful employment, education opportunities, and public services. However, this paper focuses mainly on the challenges faced by refugee children, drawn from the childhood experiences and narrations of the interviewed participants, and aims to bring forth the plight of unaccompanied minors, separated families, and their difficulties with initial adaptation and assimilation. These themes are highlighted through the Tibetan children's access to education, the systems in place for receiving and rehabilitating them, and their coping with refugee life..

Keywords - Tibetan Refugee Children, Tibetan Refugee

Introduction

India has given refuge to over 100,000 Tibetans since the Chinese occupation of 1959. The Tibetan government in exile, or the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), set up in Dharamshala is responsible for receiving and rehabilitating refugees in India, including displaced Tibetan children separated from their parents.

Education being a top priority, His Holiness the Dalai Lama requested the Indian government to assist the CTA in providing the same to Tibetan children (Gawas, 2023-24). At the Dalai Lama's request, the Nehru government consulted the states over the permanent rehabilitation of Tibetans in handicrafts, agriculture and agro-based industry settlements. While the exile community was resettling in different settlements across India, new schools were established. Similarly, new monasteries were also being established to enable the new generation of Tibetan monks and nuns to practise their religion and preserve their cultural identity. The Indian government even reserves some seats for Tibetan students in government engineering and medical colleges (Kunchok, 2023). The CTA as well as various non-profit organisations sponsor scholarships for meritorious Tibetan students for higher education.

The Council for Tibetan Education was established in 1959 under the CTA, and the independent body of Central Tibetan Schools Administration (CTSA) under the government of India was established in 1960, to look after the education of Tibetan children in India. The CTA runs the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) schools all over India's Tibetan settlements, while the Central Schools for Tibetans (CSTs) are separate schools under the CTSA. The administration of the CSTs was later handed over to the Sambhota Tibetan School

Society (STSS) under the Department of Education of the CTA.

Today the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) schools span across various branches in Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, etc. such as in Selakui, Bylakuppe, Dharamshala, Gopalpur, Ladakh, McLeod Ganj, etc. The TCV school system offers education free of cost to all Tibetan children and works as foster care for destitute and orphans through the hostel system (Dhamdul, 2023). Younger primary-level children are allowed wardens or 'mothers' as their early guardians to assist them with daily tasks like getting ready for school, homework, or laundry. The TCVs also offer free health checkups for all and free career counselling services for senior students. The medium of instruction in these schools is both English and Tibetan, with a curriculum involving NCERT textbooks supplemented by Tibetan history books printed separately by the CTA.

The focus of this paper is mainly dedicated to understanding the access to education and coping with refugee life for Tibetan refugee children.

Research Question

What are the challenges faced by the Tibetan refugee community and how is the Tibetan refugee community meeting those challenges?

Research Methodology

The focus of this paper constitutes a part of the wider research undertaken in 2023 on Tibetan refugee youth residing in New Delhi, "Negotiating Everyday Life in a City of Refuge: Experience of Tibetan Youth in New Delhi, India" by Kunjal Gawas.

Qualitative research methodology was used, mainly through field interviews with participants at the Majnu ka Tilla settlement area as well as other

areas in New Delhi, including the India Tibetan Coordination Office (ITCO) in Lajpat Nagar and the office of the think tank Foundation for Non-Violent Alternatives (FNVA). The offices of the presidents of the Regional Tibetan Women's Association (RTWA) Delhi chapter and the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress (RTYC) Delhi chapter, both based within the Majnu ka Tilla settlement, were also visited.

Snowball sampling was predominantly followed to gain the trust of participants and gather further contacts of potential participants, as well as a few instances of convenience sampling. More respondent contacts were gathered through a common initial contact based in the Majnu ka Tilla settlement, including the settlement officer, Mr. Tsering Dorjee. Interview questions followed a semi-structured topic guide with open-ended questions and candid conversations covering various themes, including family background, living conditions, educational qualifications, employment, etc. The interviews were audio-recorded, as consented to by the participants, and the instructions under the participant information sheet were verbally explained to them before starting with the interviews.

Several participants under snowball sampling were first approached via phone calls, text messages, or emails to gather consent, and then subsequently interviewed either face-to-face or through online meetings carried out via Google Meet, as per their convenience and availability. Audio recordings and signed consent forms will be kept safely by the primary researcher and accessible only to the researcher and supervisors.

The primary age group of targeted respondents is 18–35 years; however, a few participants above the age of 35 years were also interviewed to get diverse perspectives. A total of 21 participants of Tibetan descent were interviewed, including Delhi University students, café managers at Majnu ka Tilla, Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) officials at ITCO, as well as other private sector workers. Most of the interview conversations were carried out in English, with a few exceptions for Hindi responses (Dr. Jorden, n.d.). The average duration of interviews per respondent lasted for around 1 hour, depending on the responses, with the shortest duration recorded at around 30 minutes and the longest at 2 hours.

Literature Review

As per Dawa Norbu, (1997), the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) Department of Education oversees 73 schools for Tibetans in Nepal and India under different administrative bodies. Tibetan schools are either run under the Central Tibetan

Schools Administration (CTSA) under the Indian government's Ministry of Human Resource Development or managed by the CTA or charitable organisations such as Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society (STSS), and the Tibetan Homes Foundation (THF). The Central School for Tibetans (CST), formerly administered by the CTSA, is now administered under the STSS.

As per DeVoe, (1987), the CTSA was created in 1961 under the government of India, with instruction in Tibetan at the primary level and English at the senior level. Children arriving from occupied Tibet were not received in Indian government-run schools for Tibetans, which were only for Tibetan children born in India. These refugee children are, thus, distributed across CTA-run schools, like the TCVs. The CSTs were handed over to the CTA in 2014.

Sapam & Jijina, (2020), suggested that the Tibetan Children's Village schools (TCVs) are established across seven places, including TCV Lower and Upper Dharamshala, TCV Suja, TCV Bylakuppe, TCV Gopalpur, TCV Patlikuhl, and TCV Ladakh. TCVs welcome Tibetan children from 0–14 years old and are fully residential, free-of-cost schools with medical and career counselling facilities, allotting wardens or 'mothers' for younger children to assist them with their early schooling years. The CBSE curriculum is followed by NCERT textbooks and special Tibetan history and culture textbooks printed by the CTA. The Tibetan Homes Foundation (THF) was established in Mussoorie in 1962 to care for highly vulnerable Tibetan refugee children, most of whom had been orphaned or separated from their parents. The Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society administers 12 schools wherein children even above the age of 18 can be admitted for language skills or vocational courses. These students are usually the ones who migrated from Tibet at relatively older ages and were not able to attend school.

Challenges faced by refugees and Children

As per Jena, (2023), the Tibetan exile community children comprise of categories: 2 main categories those born in India to first- or second-generation Tibetan refugee parents and those born in Tibet who escaped to India much later. The first generation of Tibetan refugees migrated to India from the 1960s onwards until the 1990s to escape Chinese oppression of Tibetan-Buddhist culture and identity, and many others to find better livelihood opportunities in India. Many refugees also travelled to India, weighing their religious beliefs to seek the blessings of the Dalai Lama seeking refuge in India (Ramanathan & Singh,

2021). The first waves of refugees had to endure great difficulties in adapting to an alien land with the contrasting climatic conditions of the harsh heat on the Indian mainland and the harsh, cold, and rugged terrain of the Tibetan plateau, as well as challenges relating to rehabilitation and resettlement. Many took to picking viable livelihood options like working for road construction labour in Himalayan states, farming, contractual labour, manual labour, artisanal work, sweater-selling, or joining the Special Frontier Force (SFF), etc. to make a living. Owing to the hard work of these early generations, the younger generation of India-born Tibetans was able to move up the social ladder towards better-paying jobs in cities like the restaurant business, entrepreneurship, nursing, flight attendants, corporate workers, etc. The younger generation of such India-born Tibetan children, more often than not, grows up without experiencing the hard toil and separation trauma suffered by the older generations and is also seen assimilating better with local Indian culture.

Tibet Watch, (2022), implied on the other hand, Tibet-born children who migrated to India later in life have many challenges to endure. Orphaned or separated refugee children, however, constitute the most vulnerable of the refugees. Tibetan refugees defecting to India go through fatal risks throughout their journey, including the danger of getting shot at by Chinese border patrol guards, enduring long days of harsh cold in the rugged mountainous terrain and jungles, and undertaking long journeys with caravans or groups of strangers, often on foot. The escape from Tibet, however, is not easy, as people often leave quietly to avoid any suspicion, leaving behind property and families. Families sometimes travel in separate batches to avoid suspicion.

As per Dagar & Sharma, (2022), small children are often sent away by their parents with adult relatives or cousins to escape to India for better prospects in education while keeping their religious identity and cultural practices alive. Parents with familial networks in Nepal or India often arrange for smuggling their minor children to the Nepal border through the help of connections, from where the children are received at the Kathmandu Tibetan refugee reception centre and then sent to the Dharamshala Tibetan refugee reception centre, at the behest of the CTA (Sapam & Jijina, 2020). These children travelling without any relatives and escaping with the help of groups of caravans or hired guides (hired by their parents if they could afford guides) often end up becoming unaccompanied minors when they arrive in India.

As per Wangdu, (2021), the livelihood of the families of such displaced children back home in

Tibet constitutes difficult rural sustenance through agriculture, artisanship, and manual labour, with such difficulties amplified due to Chinese oppression, enforced erasure of Tibetan identity, and resettlement of the ethnic Han Chinese population in parts of Tibet, thus reducing the indigenous Tibetans into a minority in their land. Tibetan parents often have to undertake such difficult decisions as smuggling their small children across the border to hope for a better life for them in the land of the Dalai Lama's second home. The older the children are, the lesser the likelihood of their escape from Tibet, as they will have to uproot themselves and restart their lives all over again in India. According to the Tibet-born participants interviewed by Kunjal Gawas in 2023, many of them had migrated to India as children at ages as young as 4 to as old as 11, and they had travelled with either their close relatives, hired guides, or older siblings. With increased Chinese border patrolling in the last decade since 2008, the number of refugees from Tibet has dropped drastically (Dhamdul, 2023).

However, Dagar, (2023), unaccompanied minors often grow up without their parents in India (as their parents and some relatives/siblings stayed back in Tibet) and endure their own unique set of psychological challenges about their lonely upbringing. This, however, cannot be generalised as it depends upon the introvert or extrovert personality of the child. Tibet-born children often have to depend on personal friendships and social circles built while growing up for any future help, like in search of employment, if they don't already have an established familial network in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2020). India-born Tibetan children are more likely to struggle less in this regard as their families already have an established social network in the country from previous generations.

Phuntsog, (2020), many children go on for years without contacting their families in Tibet. The only source for establishing any contact with them is through the Chinese messaging app WeChat. However, ever since the Indian government's ban on the app in 2021, establishing communication between separated Tibetan families has become increasingly difficult. Although VPN is used, the WeChat app is under heavy surveillance by Chinese authorities, and the slightest suspicion of establishing contact with a defector in India can land trouble for the family in Tibet. The language used for texting is either Mandarin or English, and any mention of the Tibetan resistance movement, the Dalai Lama, or freedom is met with treason charges leading to enforced disappearance. The months of late February or early March are usually

avoided for any contact, as Tibetan Uprising Day is celebrated every year on March 10. Other periods avoided include the Dalai Lama's birthday (6th July) and the Panchen Lama's birthday (25th April). Thus, the communication frequency is reduced to rarely once a month or a handful of times in a year.

Assimilation and Education of Refugee Children in India

Bloch, (2023), the refugee children, along with other Tibetan refugees, received at the Tibetan refugee reception centre in Kathmandu, Nepal, are formed in groups of 30 and dispatched to Dharamshala (Bisht, 2015). At the CTA's refugee reception centre in Dharamshala, the refugees undergo health checkups, with the children separated from the adults. The children are then distributed across various TCV schools and grades based on their proximity to their relatives' homes or allotted settlements and the children's ages. The Chinese government, to promote its "One China" policy, actively imposes the Mandarin language in schools in occupied Tibet, while portraying ethnic diversities in a divisionary negative light. This has led to the forced assimilation of Tibetan children into the mainstream Han Chinese mode of education and the systematic erasure of the Tibetan language and culture.

As per Bloch, (2021), if the Tibet-born refugee children falling into the older age groups have already undergone some form of schooling in occupied Tibet, they have to undergo 2 years of Opportunity Classes to adjust to the English language medium of instruction in the TCVs and often have to be taught written Tibetan from scratch. After completing 2 years of opportunity classes, they would then have to take a written entrance test to be admitted into the appropriate class for their age or academic performance (McConnell, 2013). Many TCVs and Tibetan schools keep a stock of Mandarin language magazines and books in libraries to make such children feel accommodated in their initial years of adjustment.

According to Prodip, (2021), the medium of instruction in all TCV schools is English to make it easier for students to transition into mainstream higher education and employment prospects in India. The CBSE curriculum is followed along with NCERT textbooks for education. Tibetan language and history are taught through separately printed books by the CTA (Seetharaman, 2020). Children studying in TCVs are both Tibet-born and India-born, although the children studying in other schools like the CSTs or private schools are usually India-born Tibetan students who have families in India who can afford school fees for them. Since

the TCV schools are free of charge and employ the hostel system of living for students, Tibet-born refugee children and unaccompanied minors are accommodated and assimilated into their new lives there.

According to Ramanathan & Singh, (2021), a few Tibetan participants interviewed by Kunjal Gawas in 2023, the children migrating from Tibet would often perform poorly in classes due to their poor proficiency in English. Knowing some amount of English already would benefit such Tibet-born students in classes who couldn't communicate well in Tibetan. The Tibet-born students would also often be overaged compared to their India-born Tibetan classmates due to their migration to India at an older age or the gap of 2 years created by Opportunity Classes. The Tibet-born refugee students would have to put in double the effort during their initial years of adjustment to feel more included in their classes. The Tibet-born students are also less likely to join in physical protests due to the fear of getting recognised in photos, which could be misused against their families back in Tibet. Thus, they are more likely to practise softer ways of resistance, like sharing social media posts or raising awareness through print media or artwork.

Coping with Refugee Life

As per Dagar, (2024), the educational success of the Tibetan exile community in India and their coping mechanisms with refugee life can be attributed to community harmony, the shared trauma of separation, and the collective memories of the Chinese occupation of the Tibetan homeland passed down to generations. The greatest emotional support for the refugee children in school was that they had each other, carrying shared hardships, the trauma of separation, and the same language, religion, and culture. Above all, the Dalai Lama's presence functions as a unifying force in whom the whole community keeps faith. De Voe (1987) writes that "Tibetans are psychologically equipped to cope with refugee life because of a strong leadership who orchestrated resettlement as a period of cultural consolidation, reconstruction, and presentation in the face of probable cultural tempering and ethnic eradication in old Tibet."

Dawa Norbu (1997) writes how the repressive conditions on Tibetans back home motivated refugee students to study harder and establish wider community links across various occupations. She writes, "For refugee children, who may have lost the support of immediate family members, the embrace of a community can help to rebuild a sense of belonging and reduce the stress of isolation."

Conclusion

Some challenges remain for the Tibetan youth, such as the limited scope of job opportunities in India owing to their legal status as "refugees" or stateless persons, due to which more and more Tibetans are migrating abroad in search of greener pastures, with the help of social or familial networks based abroad. Some are acquiring Indian citizenship to attain wider job opportunities in India.

An increasing generation gap is seen among the younger generations of Tibetans about the dilution of the cause of Free Tibet, and increasing inclination towards the English language and Indian cultural sensibilities at the cost of Tibetan language and culture are seen as emerging fears. Challenges in the school classrooms of Tibetan children pertain to the quality of teaching and increased rote learning at the expense of developing critical thinking. These issues can be addressed through improved capacity-building programs and teacher training. However, despite such prevailing fears and challenges, the Tibetan exile community has undoubtedly emerged quite successful in the rehabilitation and education of Tibetan refugees and children.

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