NEGOTIATIONS WITH ONESELF:LOCATING TIBETAN YOUTH IN THE IDENTITY DISCOURSE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tsering Namgyal, who was born in India in 1971, on being asked by someone where is he from, while he was studying in Taiwan, struggled to answer this question what might appears to be a quite simple question for others. He was born in India to Tibetan parents, so, does this make him a Tibetan refugee from India? That might not be right, as it was his parents who were refugees, not him. Could he simply introduce himself as a Tibetan in exile? That would also not have been correct entirely. Since he was born in India, would that make him an Indian? Or since Tibet has been taken over by China, and is being represented as China in the world-map, would that make him a Chinese? On being told he was a Chinese, he replied in anger, "So then I am a Chinese-refugee, born in Himachal Pradesh, India? That doesn't make sense at all!"[1]

The present research paper attempts to locate Tibetan youth amidst this state of disarray and discombobulation. It looks at the political and legal connotation of citizenship, and struggle of Tibetans with respect to the same. Further, it discusses how boundaries play an important role in preserving the collective identities of groups and communities, and how absence of them can leave them vulnerable. Furthermore, it delves deeper into the phenomenon of identity and highlights how it should be treated to have been evolved through changing dynamic relations between the people, rather than looking at it only through an individual perspective. Finally, it attempts to shed light on the different generations of Tibetans living in India, and the struggle of the youth to identify with their roots.

Tibetansthroughout the world, especially Tibetan youth, appears to be struggling with their identity. It is perhaps hard for them to identify with their 'Tibetan-ness'.Consequentially, theyfind it hard to focus on their struggle for independence or 'autonomy'. On being asked who a Tibetan is, majority of them say that a Tibetan is the one who follows Buddhism. They are slowly losing the track of their identity and the idea of Tibet as a nation is gradually being lost in the minds of young Tibetans.What is Tibet for the ones who migrated to Nepal and India following the invasion of their lands by the Chinese in 1950's? And what is the idea of Tibet for the next generations of those Tibetans? The first generation comprises of the older Tibetans who were born in free Tibet and fled to India due to Chinese invasion in 1950's. The second generation comprises of those who were born in India to the first generation and has never seen the Tibet they know from the stories they are told about. The third generation of Tibetans are those who are born to the second generation (i.e., to the people who have never seen the Tibet they belong to) but have lived their lives under the guidance of those who belong to the first generation (i.e. the ones who are the storytellers.) At the time when there is a continuous threat to their identity and continuous

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[1] Rajiv Mehrotra (ed.), *Voices in Exile*54 (Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2013).

fear of dilution of their culture in majority cultures, how do the new generation identify with themselves?

II. IDENTITY, CITIZENSHIP AND BOUNDARIES

Citizenship is as old as settled human community. It defines those who are, and who are not, members of a common society.[2] Citizenship is manifestly political enterprise, yet two general issues or questions arise out of its practice: The first question concerns the issue of who can practice citizenship and on what terms it can be practiced.[3] It is not limited to the legal scope of citizenship and the formal nature of rights enshrined in it. Non-political capacities of citizens which derive from the social resources they command and which is also accessible to them. A political system of citizenship based on the equality is in reality unequal if there is a division in the society because of unequal conditions.[4]The second question concerns the consequences of advances in citizenship rights, especially for the social relationships of citizens (and non-citizens) and for the social and economic institutions in which they live and work.[5] In particular, disadvantaged groups in society might struggle for citizenship rights in order to improve their conditions.[6]For Aristotle, the idea of citizenship was the privileged status of the ruling group of the city-state, but in the modern democratic states of today, the basis of citizenship is the capacity to participate in the exercise of political power through the electoral process.

Today, in India, when the citizenship was offered to the Tibetans in exile some of the Tibetans opted for the same, while others, perhaps in the fear of dilution of their Tibetan identity and struggle for freedom, are reluctant to do the same. In the past, earlier generations believed in not adopting citizenships of the places they were residing in, under the fear of their identities being diminished. Today, the situation is a little different, as some of the Tibetans have started opting for citizenship and do not believe this to have an effect of devaluation upon their identity. Some of them are starting to recognise the positives of dual identities.

Boundaries play very important role in determining identities of different groups of people in the world. Boundaries are not just restricted to physical or territorial sense, but also includes various other elements, like language, clothing, food etc. Apart from these, political, social, cultural, and economic subordination also help in determining who belongs to a particular group and who does not. Another unifying feature of these groups is their collective memories. There shared memories make them feel and believe they belong to each other. Leaders, religious and others, make the people of their respective groups strictly obey certain norms demanding conformity. Believers are understandably hesitant to depart from the strictures of their leaders.[7] This leads to cultural pluralism between the people and groups who share common citizenship within a particular State, which is determined by a fixed physical territory or boundary.Therefore, where the mainstream society meets, such as schools, colleges, movies and other public places or media, newspapers, books etc., fights

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[2]J.M. Barbalet, *Citizenship: Rights, Struggle and Class Inequality*1 (Open University Press,England, 1988).
[3]*Ibid*.
[4]*Ibid*.
[5]*Id.* at 2.
[6]*Ibid*.
[7]Jeff Spinner, *The Boundaries of Citizenship*168(The John Hopkins University Press,Baltimore & London, 1994).

erupt between such groups because of the varied ideas of identity, collective memories, and citizenship.

It is easier for a nation, which is tied to a defined territory, to maintain its identity. It is harder for those groups who are in minority, to construct their own public spaces. These public spaces, and the memories created within them, have a very important role to play in defining and preserving identities by such groups in a State. Collective memories belong to them, and strengthen the sense of belongingness between the members of a group.For refugees, it is hardest to preserve their identities in the spaces which are alien to them, and publicly dominated by the nationals of a particular State. In such spaces, they become outsiders or strangers struggling to claim their own public space, and protect their distinct identities. They are always at the mercy of the host nations. Failing to create a public space for themselves, they try to create a private space to safeguard their unique ethnic identity. By doing this, they try to establish the boundaries between themselves and the others. Survival of their identity depends upon such boundaries.

For the minority groups who are the citizens of a particular state, maintaining these boundaries means to perform a delicate balancing act between their two identities: ethnic identity in private spaces, and identity of a citizen in public. For a refugee, in absence of any say in public matters of the host states and control of the public spaces, it is much more challenging to establish and maintain these boundaries.Political boundaries allow groups that feel their identity is threatened to gain recognition from others in the world.[8] The demand for recognition is much harder to realise for those ethnic and racial groups who lack a claim to land. For self-determination and to preserve their identity, they desire to have their own State. Therefore, in modern times, survival for all cultural and linguistic communities is a big challenge.

Tenzin Tsundue, one of the most popular Tibetan poets and activists, who resides in Dharamshala, says that, "tomorrow, even if autonomy is granted, our fight for independence will continue"[9], and certainly demands much more than what His Holiness the Dalai Lama asks through his Middle-Way Approach. He, like many other young Tibetans, fails to be satisfied with the demand of autonomy compromising with the bigger demand for complete freedod. Many young Tibetans sit on hunger strikes, organise protest march and raise slogans for 'Free Tibet' inspite of being repeatedly stopped by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Tsundue feels they are misunderstood to be violent and writes that, "…even though Tibetan Youngsters take aggressive and confrontational actions, our common credo remains non-violence."[10]

Many social groups, in absence of resistance (i.e., when they do not resist when denied rights) could find them outside of their territories and could be totally excluded or displaced. For survival, resistance is sometimes necessary to continue being a member of the State where they have formal rights or right to have a claim for the same. Such 'resistance' is important to save them from 'exclusion'. In some situations, resistance is not possible without violent protests, which can end up being counter-productive, and might reinforce the feeling of 'not belonging' within the members of a group, and can have a negative result of further 'excluding' them. It affects the image of the community to the world outside and the young immigrants could be seen as potential domestic enemy by the other members of the

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[8]*Id.* at 176.
[9]*Supra* note 1 at 72-73.
[10]*Id.* at 73.

same community, threatening their cultural or religious identity. Also, the dominant system of the State can easily exploit such community justifying its safety and security policies.

In order to move freely in all the spaces, it is important for the people to be aware of their surroundings. Also, they should be fully aware of their placement and positioning in relation to other agents around them in a given situation. They are always in this 'given' but 'changing' situation which is 'socially constructed'. The identity, in the course of discourse, is constantly changing. The world, for a group, can be described by the things they perceive, how they perceive them, and the values they attach to them. This is their identity in a given situation. Such discourses can empower them and can also trap them.Since it is socially constructed, 'individuality' should be understood as 'social individuality', which has a form peculiar to the form of our surroundings within which our individuality is nurtured and developed. Therefore, instead of treating the phenomenon of identity to be central to an individual, it should be treated to have been evolved through changing dynamic relations between the people. All the powers attributed to an individual are only by virtue of his embedding within a particular region of social activity.

John Shotter while analysing the nature of human beings in psychological context writes, "…human beings are born 'naturally' as already individuals, possessing (also 'naturally') within themselves the 'potential' for an authentic inner self, a potential which in itself owes nothing to society. And that if only our nasty, inhuman environment was changed, that potential would flower out into an authentic self of its own accord. Thus, our task then was to discover the universal nature of 'atomic' human beings (individuals), and the general 'laws' governing their motions. The motifs governing our thinking at the time were: talk of things rather than activities; science not politics; facts rather than moralities; similarities rather than differences; harmony and agreement rather than conflict and discord; homogeneity rather than heterogeneity; order rather than chaos; structures and products rather than activities and processes; unity and stability rather than plurality and instability; already existing form rather than formative (form producing) processes; finding and discovering rather than inventing and making; shared foundations (initial conditions) rather than shared reflexive awareness, that is, shared 'methods' for negotiating understandings- in short, shared meanings rather than shared means; and so on. All the first terms played a privileged part in our discourses, while all the second terms were left unvoiced."[11]

A free individual is the one who acts freely, and takes responsibility for his or her actions. For self-respect, it is important to act freely, i.e., to be able to execute one's own actions, and live a life of their own. If one's actions are dominated by others, and if one is dependent upon other people, especially for the things which provide self-respect, it will be hard to respect oneself. Therefore, people's identity is shaped by their actions, and they help them identify themselves in the society at large, and differentiate themselves from 'others'. It provides them with a sense of what they are and who they are in the identity discourse. The capacity to act freely, i.e., without any support from 'others' and without any intervention, help them own their individuality, and nurture, maintain and regulate the shape of their community.

Tenzin Lhadup, who studied in Tibetan Cultural Village School (TCV), Dharamshala, considers it to be the most effective institution which provided him with an education comprising the traditional learning of Tibetan culture and modernity. Many Tibetans today

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[11]Bryan S. Turner, ed., *Citizenship and Social Theory* 117 (Sage Publications, London, 1993).

are trying hard to adapt to alien cultures of the groups of people they struggle to even communicate with. For Tenzin, TCV helped finding him his true Tibetan identity as a 'red-cheeked, Tsampa-eating Tibetan'.[12]

III. THREE GENERATIONS AND THE TIBETAN-NESS

The combined experiences of the three generations of Tibetans in India in exile since last six-decades have impacted the identity of a Tibetan and have presented new set of challenges for the times ahead. Of these three generations, the first were affected in 1950's, when the Chinese invaded Tibet. In 1950's, this generation comprised the youth of Tibet and were in their 20's and early 30's at that time. the generation next to them grew up in the years following the upheaval, i.e., during 1960's and 1970's. the third generation was born in 1980's and 1990's, at times when the exiled community in India was comparatively established and stable. The responsibility of the entire community is on this generation now. This comprises Tibetan youth in present times who are in their 20's and 30's.

The first-generation Tibetans have grown old now and are in their 70's and 80's. They have very strong memories of their home-land Tibet and the times when Chinese invaded their lands. They still preserve the emotional bond which they have with Tibet. This generation had an important role to play in supporting and strengthening the foundations of Tibetans during the first two decades of exile, and they also comprise the first batch of Tibetan officials to be part of the Tibetan Government in Exile set up in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, India. They helped in establishing various institutions under their Government in Exile and worked hand in hand under the guidance of their leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They helped thousands of Tibetans who fled Tibet along with His Holiness in 1959 and afterwards resettle and develop as a community in the foreign land. They involved themselves in the new democratic process introduced to them and worked to strengthen their education system. It was really difficult for them to establish themselves in a land where they had to confront a lot of social, cultural and linguistic challenges, along with climatic challenges they were facing.

Unlike the first generation, the second generation have vague and faint memories of life before exile, as they were children when they were brought to India after Tibet's invasion. They were first to be introduced and exposed to the world outside of Tibet. The education system established by the first-generation Tibetans helped them learn about the traditional Tibetan culture and also about the modern curriculum. This system tried to provide these second-generation Tibetans the best of both the worlds. This generation filled the urgent need of educated man-power in the 1980's and 1990's and became the backbone of Tibetan community in exile in India. They helped maintain the institutions established by the first-generation Tibetans to preserve their Tibetan identity in the foreign land. By providing support to maintain the critical institutions like Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) and Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) located in Dharamshala, they helped Tibetan Government in Exile in preserving their roots.

The third generation of Tibetans in exile in India are in their 20's and 30's. Educationally, they are far better off than the previous generation and have much more exposure to the outside world compared to the first- and second-generation Tibetans in exile. The system of universal education, flourishing under His Holiness has helped mould Tibetan

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[12]*Supra* note 1 at 68.

identity in exile by getting away with the traditional class-based society and transforming the same into modern society based on the principle of equity, where every Tibetan is provided with an equal opportunity. The democratic system of Tibetan Government in Exile had, this way, a huge impact in this positive transformation. This helped them being united in the foreign land and preserve their primary identities as Tibetans.

The biggest challenge for the new generation of Tibetans in exile in India and other places around the world is to cautiously study, understand and analyse the concept of identity, which comprises of their language, culture, religion and much more. They need to analyse how this concept applies to them and what the latest challenges are to preserve their identity, in absence of any land or territory of their own, where they have control over the political matters. Their identity is being undermined in both Tibet, which is now in total control of Chinese government, and in exile. Unlike the previous generations they definitely lack direct historical continuity.

The generation gap is unavoidable and natural in all communities of the world. It is an issue which needs to be tackled with utmost diligence in Tibetan context, as they lack a common piece of land which they can call home, and have political control over. Preserving identity in exile could be difficult when a generation undermines the efforts of the previous conditions. Tibetans, today, need to preserve their social fabric, which is the biggest challenge for them as they are spread across the worlds and can easily be diluted in the dominant cultures, they exist in.

IV. CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

"If you really want to, bring me some sand from Tibet"[13] was what Tenzing Gelek replied on being asked by his Chinese friend, who was visiting Tibet, what he would want her to get him from Tibet. He writes that with one request, he had bared the innermost feelings that he shared with most exiled Tibetans – the longing to touch a place called home, the longing to belong.[14] Tibet for him is a place he had grown up listening to his grandparents speak about while living in a refugee settlement in India. This is the place which he, and many others, have never seen, but imagined and pictured through the stories they have heard in their childhood. It pains him as well as thousands of others, to explain to the people difference between themselves and Chinese. With regard to the question of need of preserving Tibetan identity, he believes Tibet to be more than just a cause. He believes Tibet to be his way of life and the ultimate purpose like many other members of his community. It motivates him to study that extra hour each night, and he firmly believes it to be the driving force for many others making them pay extra attention teaching their children about their language and culture and who they really are and to stand true to their responsibilities that they have inherited from older generations.

Language has played a major role of custodian of Tibetan cultural heritage in the lives of Tibetans in exile. Perhaps this is one of the most crucial issues that Tibetan community is facing in the light of unintentional neglect by the Tibetan community in exile. It is really important to create a favourable environment at homes for the language which is mother-tongue for this community in exile. It is undoubtedly an essential ingredient of parenthood and childhood.

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[13]*Id.* at 64.
[14]*Ibid.*

Minority groups are always under threat of being absorbed and diluted into the majority groups. In places with multi-ethnic geography, it is important for such minority groups to safeguard themselves from dominant ethnic groups. Within their own land, they are purportedly being integrated and absorbed into the larger groups. Tibetan community in exile have accommodated themselves quite well in their host cultures at various places, but at the same time it must be noticed that not all the transformation and adaptation has been positive for them. The new generation has a bigger challenge to save themselves from the process of subconscious acculturation which, if not taken care of, might lead them to irreversible assimilation in the future.

The language is growing unpopular among the new generation, for being economically disadvantaged. In Tibet, as well as in exile, the community is forced to learn more 'lucrative' languages like Mandarin and English. Until now, Tibetans in exile have successfully preserved their linguistic identity by providing favourable environment within their private spaces for speaking Tibetan language. Exposure of young children to the outside world, technological advancement, and increasing dependence on English is forcing youth to focus more on English compared to 'less-profitable' Tibetan.

The first generation exiled Tibetans had the responsibility of inter-generational transmission of Tibetan language. The responsibility then fell onto second generation Tibetans in exile. The present and future generation need to keep in their minds that it only takes just one or two generation gaps before a language is completely forgotten, and goes into total extinction. It is very important to have your own language to safeguard your culture. In context of Tibetans in exile, their Tibetan-ness is deeply encoded in their distinct culture, which can only be articulated through own distinct language. Therefore it is necessary to have a distinct language and culture in order to preserve their identity in foreign land. Languages hold the cultural and traditional folklore within them. With the loss of language ancient knowledge and wisdom are also lost. In such a situation, it is advisable for such communities to ponder over this and save themselves well in advance before subconsciously inflicting cultural and linguistic suicide upon themselves. Therefore, Tibetan youth today must work hard to safeguard, protect, and revive the vitality of their language.

Yanki Tseering rightly says, "The importance of preserving our culture becomes greater when we realise that we don't have a place to call our home."[15] Tibetan youth today will have to make extra efforts to educate themselves and to make them aware about their background and traditional identity. They need to understand what their parents' culture was, and where do they belong to as individuals and as a community. They need to be always attached to their roots, especially in the current situation, when they have been in exile since last three generations.

For majority of young Tibetans in exile in India and at other places, it is important for them to be aware of their culture as ignorance can be embarrassing for them. As admitted by many of them, they are forced to know all about their culture as they are faced with a lot of curious people from other communities who know little about them and want to know more. Therefore, it may be said, that for these people, exile could be a blessing in disguise as it has given them a keener appreciation of their roots. Moreover, when they are exposed to other cultures, it makes them aware about their own distinct culture more.

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[15]*Id.* at 78.

Both the Tibetan Government in Exile and the Tibetan communityhave made conscious efforts in the last few decades to save their religion, language, and culture, all of which is under real threat of elimination and extinction in Tibet, because of occupation by Chinese. They had been successful in preserving some of the religious institutions and their religious literature, but in other aspects of the culture, the result has only been satisfactory to some extent. TIPA is one the non-religious institutions set up for the preservation of their unique culture. TCV schools have played huge role in providing Tibetan education to the young kids, along with modern education. They have played an important role in providing these young kids with a favourable 'Tibet-like' environment and strengthening their cultural understanding at young age.

The Italian town of Bellagio hosted a conference for prominent western and Japanese Tibetologists in 1962, where they observed and concluded that Tibetan culture had no chance of survival in Tibet and other parts of the world.[16] They were sure that it would not be able to survive the acculturation process around the globe, but so far, Tibetan community has shown tremendous resilience, by safeguarding Tibetan culture and keeping it alive. It is yet to see how Tibetan youth respond to the latest challenges posed by the changing environment around them. It is yet to see how they manage to preserve the age-old traditional culture of Tibet, especially amidst the technological advancement in the last decade, apart from political and legal challenges for survival.

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[16]*Id.* at 62.