Identity in Question
The Study of Tibetan Refugees in the Indian Himalayas

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Dedicated to

Late Prof. Sameeera Maiti

“Don’t Grieve.
Anything you lose comes round in another form.”

-Rumi
# Table of Contents

List of figures ix  
Preface xiii  
Acknowledgement xv  

Chapter 1  
Refugees and Identity: Problems and Challenges  
Introduction 1  
Literature Review 4  
Rationale of the Study 11  
Conceptual and Theoretical Framework 12  
Objectives of the Study 17  
Scope and Methodology 17  

Chapter 2  
Background of Tibetan Refugees in India 23  
Introduction 23  
Tibet: A Historical Backdrop 23  
Origin of Tibetan Crisis 25  
Beginning of Tibetan Refugee Era: India 27  
Establishment of CTA 29  
The Struggle in Progress 29  
Migration and After 32  

Chapter 3  
Profiling the Tibetan Refugees in Indian Himalayas 37  
Introduction 37  
Description of the Centers 38  
Socioeconomic and Demographic Profile 40
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>Documenting the Experiences of Tibetan Refugee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dangerous Journeys of Escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being Tibetan in a Different Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration with Indian Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preserving Tibetan Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future Aspiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>The Objective Tibetan Identity: Formation and Crystallization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptualizing Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions on Tibetan Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relation between Integration and Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tibetan Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity Crystallization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>Gender and Identity Issues among the Tibetan Refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Status of Women in Pre-Modern Tibet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inheritance of Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s Political Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Priority in Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position of Women Comparative to Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of the Status of Women in Host Country (India)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation and Discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7  Conclusion  141
  Introduction  141
  Integration of Refugees  142
  Question of Tibetan Identity  145
  Concluding Remarks  157

References  159

Index  173
List of figures

**Figure 1.1:** Conceptual framework defining core domains of integration 13

**Figure 1.2:** Map of the refugee settlement at McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh 20

**Figure 1.3:** Map of the refugee settlement at Dalhousie, Himachal Pradesh 21

**Figure 1.4:** Map of the refugee settlement at Darjeeling, West Bengal 21

**Figure 1.5:** Map of the refugee settlement at Sonada, West Bengal 22

**Figure 1.6:** Map of the refugee settlement at Ravangla, Sikkim 22

**Figure 3.1:** Sample distribution 38

**Figure 3.2:** Age composition (in range) of the respondents as per settlement areas 41

**Figure 3.3:** Sex composition of the respondents 41

**Figure 3.4:** Sex ratio of respondents’ family members 42

**Figure 3.5:** Sex ratio of children in respondents’ family 43

**Figure 3.6:** Marital status of the respondents 44

**Figure 3.7:** Average age of marriage of the married respondents 44

**Figure 3.8:** Average age of respondents’ spouse at the time of marriage 45

**Figure 3.9:** Educational status of the respondents 46

**Figure 3.10:** Educational status of the family members 47

**Figure 3.11:** Educational status of the children 48

**Figure 3.12:** Occupational distribution 49

**Figure 3.13:** Average monthly income of the respondents and family 49

**Figure 3.14:** Respondent’s ownership of basic household infrastructure 52

**Figure 3.15:** Particulars of respondent’s average monthly expenditure 52

**Figure 3.16:** Basic amenities: Water supply 54

**Figure 3.17:** Basic amenities: Communication device 54
Figure 6.7: Spheres of decision making by Tibetan men and women 131
Figure 6.8: Spending power 132
Figure 6.9: Activities of refugee women during their recreational time 132
Figure 6.10: Domestic violence 133
Figure 6.11: Political participation of women 134
Figure 6.12: Women’s participation in Tibet freedom movement 135
Figure 6.13: Priority in life 135
Figure 6.14: Position of women comparative to men 136
Figure 6.15: Perception of the Status of women in host country (India) 136
Preface

This book is based on the 2018 project report *Socio-Economic Conditions and the question of Identity among the Tibetan Refugees of the Indian Himalayas*, submitted to the ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research), Government of India, which enquires the socio-economic conditions of the Tibetan refugees living in the Indian Himalayan regions, stretching from Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh to Ravangla in Sikkim, and how the question of identity is being conceptualized, articulated and negotiated in their everyday life.

The initial conceptual backdrop of the study came through our interaction with the Tibetan refugees who are settled in Sikkim and Darjeeling, West Bengal. These are colleagues and friends with whom we sit and dine. (This is not to be confused with those Sikkimese citizens who are of Tibetan origin and lineage and are regarded as old settlers, such as Bhutias). Most of these colleagues and friends have acculturated to the local cultural environment, in terms of speaking the language, food habits, fashions, and so on and forth, assimilating with the society where they are. Some have also established affinal relations successfully. Through our discussions with them, we have realized that the assimilation of the refugees and the question of their identity is an unexplored field with lots of scope for research, at least in this part of the country.

Following, back in 2016, we made a proposal for research to the ICSSR, which they accepted. Subsequently, in 2018, the project report with the combined effort of the research team based at Sikkim University was submitted. The observations, findings, and analysis of the report are those of the researchers based on their field analysis. The project’s main objective was to explore the dynamism concerning both the socio-economic status and the question of the identity of the Tibetan refugees in general, and the youth and women in particular in the Indian Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and West Bengal.

It is an independent, analytically- and empirically-grounded discussion of major sociological insights pertaining to the question of identity among the Tibetan refugees. The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the background of the research question under study. Chapter two deals with the background of Tibetan Refugees in India; chapter three brings out the Tibetan refugees' socio-economic and demographic profile in India, using statistical tools. Chapter four provides a narrative account of Tibetans' lived experiences during their flight and the struggle in
India. Chapter five raises some questions related to the identity of the Tibetan refugees. Chapter six is on gender and identity issues among the Tibetan refugees. The final chapter brings out the major challenges and issues of the Tibetans and the way forward.
Acknowledgement

The work is the result of the contributions made by numerous individuals and organizations, along with the collaborative efforts of the authors in shaping the final work in the form of this book. We would like to begin documenting those efforts by thanking the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Government of India, who sponsored the study. Without the financial assistance given by them, the work would have been almost impossible: collecting the colossal information on the Tibetan refugees who are spread across the length and breadth of India requires a tremendous amount of resources. We are honored for the privilege that the ICSSR has extended us by supporting the study. The original work, when it was proposed to ICSSR, was entitled *Socio-Economic Conditions and Question of Identity among the Tibetan Refugees of the Indian Himalayas*, and the report with the same title has also been submitted. The study explores the socio-economic background and the dynamic relationship between the formalization and negotiation of identity among the Tibetan refugees settled in the Himalayan regions of India, particularly among youths and women.

We will be forever indebted to (Late) Prof. Sameera Maiti, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University. Prof. Maiti was a gentle yet vociferous and determined academician—an anthropologist par excellence, who always had a knack for research. Without her constant guidance and feedback, this work would have never set its first foot into academia, contributing to the discourses surrounding refugee issues, particularly the Tibetan refugees. It is heart-breaking to realize that she is no longer with us. We thank her for the guidance she has shown us, in both academic and emotional fronts, illustrated through her anecdotal worldview. We will miss you.

We are also grateful to Prof. T.B. Subba, an eminent anthropologist of international repute and former Vice-Chancellor of Sikkim University, for sparing his valuable time and sharing some of his experiences on the subject matter along with his continued inspirational intellectual advice, guidance, and thoughts. Going through his works and the discussion which we had with him has helped us in conceptualizing and charting the framework of the study.

Further, it would be an injustice to the study not to mention the name of Ms. Shristi Kala Chhetri, Research Assistant. It was her sheer professionalism, enthusiastic approach, and dedication towards the study that made it happen. Literature work on the historical background of Tibet and its people, the framing of questionnaires, and a major collection of the field data were her important contribution to the research work. We also are thankful to all the
respondents and all other members who were directly or indirectly involved in the study for their most valuable feedback during the group discussions and survey. Without their kind help and support, this work would have been not possible. We are ever thankful and indebted to all our contributors for their help.

We are also grateful to the managers in charge of the Tibetan refugee centers for their guidance and support. The enthusiastic responses which we have received from the respondents further motivated us to complete the work successfully. Our special thanks go to Mr. Tenzing Wangda (Darjeeling), Mr. Lopsang, Mr. Tashi, Mr. Tenzing Pawo, Mr. Tenzing Nagwang, Mr. Sonam Dandul, Mr. Tenzing Zampa, Mr. Tenzing Norzin, Mr. Tenzing Jorden, Mr. Tenzin Nordhen (Ravangla), and Tsering Doma (sponsorship coordinator Ravangla). Sincere thanks to Tashi Rapten, Ugen Choden, Pema Tseten, and Tshering Wang (Ravangla), who aided and assisted in the focus group discussion, also sharing their personal narratives and experiences, which brought smiles and tears. Mr. Yalamber Subba and all the apala/pala and amala who have guided us during the fieldwork, given insights, shared their experiences, and showed love, support, and appreciation.

The consultations, discussions, and the great amount of homework held during the preparation of the manuscript with the generous support and help from family, friends, and colleagues will always remain in our heart with appreciation and respect.

We would like to acknowledge and express our gratitude to all the colleagues and faculty members of the Department of Sociology, Sikkim University. Dr. Sandhya Thapa (Associate Professor, Head), Dr. K. Indira, Mr. Shankar N. Bagh, Mrs. Sona Rai, and Mr. Binod Bhattarai (Assistant Professors) for their moral support and encouragement.

We also want to thank and appreciate the contribution of the anonymous reviewer, whose valuable feedback and comments have really helped in improving and (re)shaping the work.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the entire team of Vernon Press for giving us an opportunity to publish our work with them. We also want to thank Argiris Legatos, Editorial Manager, Victoria Echegaray, Assistant Editor, and Javier Rodriguez, Marketing Coordinator for helping and guiding us in every step in the process of preparation and publication of the manuscript.

Dr. Swati A. Sachdeva
Yumnam Surjyajeevan
Chapter 1

Refugees and Identity:
Problems and Challenges

Introduction
Since the time humanity reached out from the plains of Africa to the continents of the world, humans have been migrating, making the history of migration as old as the history of human civilization itself. Till a few centuries ago, people nomadically ventured around in search of food, water, and habitable climatic conditions as borders were practically open. Migration at a later phase was mostly fueled by the need for trade and commerce, and expansion of territories—both in an economic and geographical sense, which paved the way for colonialization as well as the consolidation of nations, along with various other factors driven by socio-political undercurrents of the time. Nation-building also became an important state-sponsored project, which is a conscious strategy initiated by a state (Kolstø, 2000). The emergence of the modern nation-state was carried out through the ‘process of collective identity formation…to legitimiz[e]…public power within a given territory’ (Bogdandy et al., 2005, p. 586; emphasis added). With the consolidation of the nation-state, restrictions were placed on the free movement of people, confining them within given geopolitically-defined boundaries along with particularities about citizenship and the creation of insider-outsider dichotomies. Migration, therefore, became a closely monitored and delimited phenomenon vis-à-vis international cross-border migration.

The existing global geopolitical scenario, which embodies the insider-outsider dichotomies, ethnic conflicts, civil wars, genocidal prosecution directed against particular ethnic group or community, has coercively compelled people to leave their homeland and seek asylum in some other country, such as the case of Rohingya and Syrian in recent times. These groups of people who leave their own country and sought shelter/asylum in a host country temporarily or on a permanent basis for political reasons are termed ‘refugees’. However, defining a refugee is conceptually challenging when locating the reasons in historical contextuality, suggesting the adoption of a diachronic view rather than synchronic observation. There is a difference between the Protestants who fled 17th century France due to religious persecution and the Syrians who took flight from incessant bombings during
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curious customs, their religion, ways of living, trade, and social life. New Delhi: Light and Life publishers.


References


## Index

**1**
- 1951 Convention on Refugees, 2
- 1967 Protocol, 2

**A**
- Aadhaar card, 154
- acculturation, 5, 35
- Africa, 1
- Ager and Strang, 13, 91
  - citizenship and rights, 14, 102
  - conceptual model, 13
  - level of integration, 13
  - Markers and Means, 13, 91
  - Social Connection, 14
- agricultural land, 40
- alien terrain, 145
- *Amji*, 55, 94
- annihilation, 26
- Asian societies, 120
- Assam, 38, 39
- assimilation, 5, 11, 12, 17, 35, 91
- asylum, 3, 81
  - Iranians, 3
  - Mughal period, 3
- authoritarian, 89
- autoethnographic, 5
- autonomous, 25, 72
- autonomy, 33

**B**
- Bangladesh liberation war, 3
- Bangladeshi, 92
- below matriculate, 46
- Bhutia, 82
- Bhutias, 8
- bigamy, 138
- Bollywood, 75
- *Bon*, 24
- borders, 1
- Bride wealth, 126
- Buddhists, 30
- Buddhist Philosophy, 79
- Buxa Duar, 38
- Bylakuppe, 119

**C**
- caste system, 137
- Central School for Tibetans, 92
- Central Tibetan Administration, 4
- centres, 17
- Chenrezig, 24
  - *Avalokitesvara*, 24
- China, 7
  - colonial rule in Tibet, 7
  - Most Favoured Nation, 7
- *Chin-bhote*, 151
- Chinese government, 55
- Chinese occupation, 5
- Chogyal, 25
- Citizenship Act 1955, 2
- collective identities, 59
- Collective identity, 88
  - define, 88
- Communism, 27
- communists, 26
- comparison of adaptation, 8
- conflating, 67
- constructionist, 141
- Constructionist, 88
coping mechanism, 61
CTA, 4, 11, 17, 89, 90
employed, 48
established, 11
government-in-exile, 4, 11
cultural hegemony, 100
cultural homogenization, 59
cultural identities, 86
Cultural Revolution, 27, 29
cultural transmission, 144

D
Dalai Lama, 4, 5, 6, 9, 89, 105, 114
devoted himself, 105
headquarters, 39
three important tasks, 105
Dalhousie, 37, 39, 42, 48, 60, 63,
69, 90, 93, 94, 95, 98, 99
Darjeeling, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 19, 21,
22, 37, 39, 40, 42, 60, 73, 78, 90,
93, 94, 95, 97, 98, 99
decision making, 20, 130
Delhi, 70
Dharamsala, 8, 10, 11, 19, 20, 37,
42, 43, 48, 60, 66, 69, 71, 72, 73,
74, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 89,
93, 94, 95, 96, 98, 99, 105
Dharma, 77
disciplinarian boundaries, 88
discriminate, 119
dispositional, 141
Dispositional, 88
dispositional perspective, 88
Domestic violence, 133
domicile certificate, 92

E
economic independence, 18
Economic independence, 92
economic profile

indicators., 37
economically integrated, 92
economically stable, 46
Education, 45, 47
ego identity, 88
emplacement, 80
Employment, 92
Economic independence, 92
hand on training to artisans and
craftsman, 39
hawkimg woollen hosiery, 39
seasonal business, 48
selling hosiery, 48
enclavement, 80
enculturation, 34
Erik Erikson, 15
Erikson, 88
Essentialist, 88
essentialist,, 141
Essentialists, 88
ethnically, 26
exodus, 32, 59

F
firsthand experiences, 5
food, 101
availability, 101
cultural, 101
geographically, 101
kaccha, 101
pucca, 101
foreign aid, 8
Foreigners Act 1946, 2
fraternal polyandry, 124
functional theorisation, 113
conflicts, 113

G
Gelupa sect, 25
gender egalitarian, 120
Index

genocide, 32
globalization, 34
Goffman, 16
‘Government in Exile’, 33
gumpas, 68

H

harbingers, 74
Himachal Pradesh, 4, 17, 19, 21, 37, 39, 60, 113
Hindi, 40, 99
homogenisation, 100
household survey, 19
human development, 45
hybridity, 59
hypothermia, 63

I

identity, 1, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20
assert individuality, 86
consolidation, 91
construction, 89
crystallisation, 91
formation, 91
Identity politics, 85
indeterminacy, 89
internalised meanings, 15
meaning, 15
self-conceptions, 14
subjective, 16, 17, 18
three types of identity, 87
Identity, 85, 86, 104, 112
collective identity, 87
concept, 85
interaction, 86
Language, 89
modernity, 85
multicultural approach, 86
objectification, 85
personal identity, 87
product of relationship, 86
social identity, 87
Tibetan, 85
identity construction, 89
identity politics
claim to identity, 86
gain a voice, 86
interpersonal conflict, 86
nationality, 86
politically aware, 115
shift, 86
status quo, 86
Identity politics, 85, 86
ethnicity, 86
Feminists, 86
multicultural approach, 86
sexual orientation, 86
ideology, 101
illiterate, 45
independent status of Tibet, 7
indescribable, 27
Indian Co-operative Societies Act 1970, 40
Indian Himalayan, 37
Indian Kurta, 149
Indian Universities, 92
India-Pakistan partition, 3
Inductive Thematic Analysis, 60
inegalitarian, 121
integration, 5, 90, 91, 92, 94, 99, 101
Integration
Assimilation, 91
interaction, 86
act toward, 87
contingent, 87
Interaction
Movies, 100
interactionists, 147
intercommunity marriages, 98
intermarriage, 150
Interview schedule, 19

J

Joint family, 124

K

kaccha, 101
Karma, 72
Karnataka, 4, 8
Khampa rebellion, 32
King Songtsen Gampo, 25
Kunphenling, 40

L

Lamaism, 25
Language

converse, 40
Language, 89, 99
late-modernity, 85
law of karma, 153
legal status, 2
Lepchas, 8
lexical, 121
lingua franca, 60
literacy

matriculation, 47
Literacy

female, 47
post-graduation, 47

M

Mahayana Buddhist, 152
marriage by capture, 138
Marxist, 32
matriculate, 45
McLeod Ganj, 11, 17, 19, 20, 39, 90
memorandum, 30
methodology

interviews, 18

later generation, 12
merits, 18
mixed research design, 18
participant and non-participant observation, 18
primary data, 18
samples, 37
semi-structured interviews, 18
socio-economic and demographic details, 18
subsequent generation, 11
three techniques, 18
Methodology

first generation, 11
mixed methods research, 18
parameter, 100
micro-sociological perspective, 13
Middle-Way Approach, 72
migration, 1

colonization, 1
delimited phenomenon, 1
infiltrators, 2
insider-outsider, 1
territories, 1
trade and commerce, 1
Migration

Muslim, 2
military dictatorship, 27
Missamari, 38, 39
modernity, 85

homogenous group identity, 86
modernization, 34
momo, 149
monogamous, 121
multicultural approach, 86

N

nag mo (the black one), 121
Namgyal dynasty, 150
nationality, 86
naturalization, 34
Nehru, 4, 5
Nepalese, 8, 24
Nepali, 99

O

occupation by China, 6
occupations, 92
army, 92
nurse, 92
officials, 92
teachers, 92
ontological, 65

P

Panchsheel memorandum, 31
Panchsheel Treaty, 30
Partition, 92
pastoral regimes, 126
patriarchy, 123
patrilineal, 121, 124
Peaceful Liberation, 27
People's Republic of China's claim of Tibet, 7
perilous, 119
personal is political, 86
personality, 89
phenomenological approach, 60
Phuntsokling, 39
pilgrimage, 121
political activism, 115
political participation, 10, 20
Political participation, 134
polyandry, 124
polygamous, 121
polygyny, 124
postmodernity, 85
gays, 86
lesbians, 86
sociocultural challenges, 85
poststructuralism, 85

Q

Qing Dynasty, 25
qualitative research, 60

R

Ravangla, 11, 17, 19, 22, 37, 40, 42, 48, 60, 62, 65, 68, 74, 77, 90, 93, 94, 95, 98, 99
recognized refugees, 63
recreation activities, 132
Red Hats', 25
refugee, 1
definition, 2
diachronic, 1
synchronic, 1
refugee camps, 8
Registration Certificates, 92
rehabilitation strategy, 18
Rohingya, 1
Roof of the World", 23

S

sample, 19, 20
samples, 19
Sanitation, 55
Sasum, 124
satisfactory identities, 89
September 11, 2001, 88
settlements, 8, 9, 12, 17, 19, 20
Seventeen Point Agreement', 26
Shamanism., 24
Sherab Miwo, 24
siblings, 62
Sikkim, 3, 4, 9, 10, 12, 17, 19, 22,
    37, 40, 60, 62, 65, 66, 68, 69, 73,
    74, 75, 77, 82
Sikkimese, 82
sinicized, 152
Sino-Tibetan, 6
social and demographic profile, 37
    constitute, 37
social identity, 76, 87
social psychologists, 87
social structure, 34
socialist, 30
socio-economic and demographic
    profile, 37
socio-historical, 34
sociological interpretation, 12
sociological relationship, 111
Sonada, 11, 17, 19, 22, 37, 40, 42,
    90, 93, 94, 95, 97, 98, 99
sovereignty, 145
spoiled identity thesis, 89
status quo, 86
Structuralists, 88
Syrian, 1

T

Tamil refugees
    first phase, 3
    second phase, 3
    third phase, 4
Tashiling, 40
terrorist attacks, 88
theocratic rule, 25
thupka, 149
Tibet
    suppression of cultural, 7
Tibetan
    instinctive traders, 8
Tibetan diaspora, 59
Tibetan history, 6
Tibetan identity, 28
    Ethnicity, 109
    everyday life, 111, 117
Tibetan Identity
    objective criteria, 109
    Tibetaness, 106
Tibetan medicine, 62
Tibetan Parliament in Exile, 90
Tibetan Rebellion, 7
Tibetan refugees, 4
    adaptation, 8
    difference in the number, 4
    educational qualifications, 45
    living in India, 4
    problems, 8
    question of identity, 12, 13
    rehabilitation, 116
Tibetan rehabilitation
    programme, 39
Tibetan women
    economically unproductive, 92
    gender egalitarian, 120
    Kyemen (inferior birth), 121
    marriage payments, 126
    Political participation, 134
    sky es bas mtho’ (higher by
    birth), 121
    skyes bu rab (superior person),
    121
    tsamdenma (she who has
    limitations), 121
Tibetan Women
    female infanticide, 120
    sky es bas rgyal (victorious by
    birth), 121
Tibetaness, 59, 106
traditionalism, 98
## Index

### U
- United Nations Organization, 31

### V
- Vaccination, 55
- vanguard of revolution', 27

### W
- West Bengal, 4, 10, 17, 19, 37
- westerners, 151
- World Trade Centre, 88

### Y
- ‘Yellow Hat’, 25
- yoghurt, 121
- younger generations, 99