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Preface

It is with great joy that we present this issue of the *Tibet Policy Journal*. This issue of scholarly contributions emerged from the Institute's flagship annual conference held in Dharamshala. This is usually convened soon after monsoon has retreated from the region. This conference has proven to be a significant platform for engagement among scholars, researchers and practitioners in the field of Tibetan and Himalayan studies. It has seen deliberations on broader geopolitics, society and understanding historical processes that are crucial in understanding these interconnected spaces. This volume is a reflection of continued interest in scholarship on Tibet related subjects in India.

Articles published in this issue delve into diverse range of themes. However, a common concern weaves through all the papers, which is to study Tibet and the Himalayan region through interdisciplinary perspectives. Often transcending conventional political boundaries. The contributions examine questions of sovereignty, identity, geopolitics, trade, historical memory, borderlands, religious institutions, and trans-regional connections. Taken together, they demonstrate that Tibet cannot be understood solely through the lens of contemporary political debates; rather, it must be situated within broader historical, cultural, environmental, and geopolitical contexts.

As with previous issues, this volume owes its existence to the collective efforts of many individuals. We would like to acknowledge the scholars who participated in the conference and subsequently developed their presentations into articles for publication. Their willingness to engage with editorial feedback and refine their work has made this issue possible. Special appreciation is due to Dr. Tsering Dolma, who coordinated the 2025 conference and subsequently worked closely with contributors throughout the publication process. And also, the editor reserves a special appreciation for the administrative division of the TPI for conducting the conference in a seamless fashion.

We are pleased to present this issue to our readers and hope that it will stimulate further research, discussion, and collaboration in the fields of Tibet and Himalayan studies.

Tenzin Desal

Editor

Tibet Policy Institute

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Under Cloak and Culture: The Spy-cum-Ethnographer Sarat Chandra Das and Tibetan Buddhism in the Eastern Himalayas

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Abstract

This study systematically analyzes Sarat Chandra Das's detailed nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts of Tibetan Buddhist rituals, recorded during his travels in Tibet while disguised as a monk. Focusing on ceremonies and daily religious life in major monasteries, it investigates the persistence and evolution of these practices among Tibetan communities in Sikkim and Darjeeling. While Das is often recognized as a spy, this research foregrounds the underexplored transmission and adaptation of the rituals he described. Key questions include which rituals Das documented, how they are practiced today among Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist communities, and how their form, meaning, or social significance has changed over time and in exile. Using textual analysis of Das's works and ethnographic fieldwork, the study maps continuities and transformations in ritual life. Ultimately, it argues that these rituals have not only persisted but have been actively transformed, demonstrating the resilience and adaptive capacity of Tibetan Buddhist traditions in India's Eastern Himalayas.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Ethnography, Rituals, Eastern Himalaya

Introduction

Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917) holds a unique and complex position in the intertwined histories of Tibetan studies, colonial intelligence, and early ethnographic scholarship on Tibet. Celebrated as one of the pioneering scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and simultaneously condemned as a colonial spy, Das embodies the contradictions and moral ambiguities of nineteenth-century colonial knowledge production. His life and work offer a compelling lens through which to examine the intersection of imperial intelligence gathering and nascent anthropological inquiry, particularly in Tibetan Buddhist studies.

Born in Chittagong, Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh), Das's trajectory from a civil engineering student to headmaster of the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling, and ultimately to a clandestine agent in Tibet, reflects the complex opportunities and constraints faced by colonial subjects. Das undertook two significant journeys to Tibet, in 1879 and 1881–82, ostensibly as a Buddhist pilgrim but in reality as a British intelligence agent tasked with gathering information about this largely inaccessible land.

What distinguished Das from typical Pundit spies was the depth and sophistication of his observations. While

Pundits focused primarily on geographical mapping and basic intelligence, Das's linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, and intellectual curiosity enabled him to produce detailed accounts of Tibetan Buddhist religious practices, monastic organization, and social customs. As noted in "Transcending Coloniality," Das's narrative "chronicles a vivid picture of the socio-cultural life of the Tibetans along with the factual information that the Imperial powers wanted him to record (1887). This data includes details about Tibetan polity and structure of its governance, power hierarchy, the status of women in their society, customs, festivals, religion and culture among other nuances of Tibet." His major work, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (1902), remains one of the most comprehensive modern records of Tibetan Buddhist life, and his observations continue to hold value for scholars today.

Despite extensive scholarship on Das's role as a spy and explorer, a significant gap remains regarding his contributions as an ethnographer of Tibetan Buddhism. Most studies focus on his intelligence activities, geographical discoveries, or involvement in the Great Game, paying little attention to the specific religious and cultural practices he documented. This oversight is striking given that Das's observations of Tibetan Buddhist rituals, ceremonies, and monastic life are among the most detailed accounts available. Furthermore, limited research connects Das's historical documentation with contemporary Tibetan Buddhist practices in the Eastern Himalayas of India,

particularly among communities in Sikkim and Darjeeling. Understanding how these traditions have evolved, adapted, or persisted in the Indian Himalayan context could provide valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of Tibetan Buddhist culture.

This study addresses this research gap by critically examining Das's work through the lens of ethnographic scholarship, rather than colonial history alone. The first major section analyzes his contributions to Tibetan Buddhist ritual accounts and traces their continuity and transformation among present-day Himalayan communities. It delves into the specific religious and ritual practices Das documented, assessing their significance and accuracy, and compares them with contemporary ethnographic data from Sikkim and Darjeeling. The second section focuses on Das as an ethnographer, exploring his methodological innovations and limitations. By doing so, it aims to illuminate patterns of continuity and change in Tibetan Buddhist practices since Das's time, as well as the broader implications for understanding cultural resilience and adaptation in the face of displacement and historical trauma.

Great Game and the Pundit System: Colonial Intelligence Networks in Tibet

Sarat Chandra Das's emergence as a spy-cum-ethnographer is inextricably linked to the broader geopolitical context of the

nineteenth-century Great Game, the strategic rivalry between the British and Russian empires for dominance in Central Asia. This conflict created the conditions for Das's recruitment as a British intelligence agent and his transformation into an early ethnographer of Tibetan Buddhist culture.

The term "Great Game," describing this covert imperial struggle, was coined by British intelligence officer Arthur Connolly in the early 1840s (Wolf). Rudyard Kipling popularized it through his 1901 novel *Kim* (Kipling 1901, 117), which depicted intrigue, espionage, and psychological tension, solidifying the "Great Game" as a symbol of high-stakes rivalry and elaborate intelligence networks that shaped Central Asia. This represented a fundamental shift in imperial strategy as both Britain and Russia sought to expand their influence. Britain aimed to protect its Indian empire from Russian encroachment, while Russia sought warm-water ports and expanded trade routes.

Tibet held a crucial position in this geopolitical chess game, situated as a buffer zone between British India and Russian-influenced China (Hopkirk 1990). Its strategic importance was amplified by its deliberate isolation, making it nearly impossible for British officials to gather essential geographical, political, and military intelligence. The forbidding Himalayan terrain, hostile border tribes, and Tibetan authorities' resistance to foreign penetration created an impenetrable barrier to

conventional intelligence operations.

In response, the British developed the innovative Pundit system, a network of indigenous agents trained in surveying and equipped with concealed instruments. These agents could penetrate forbidden territories disguised as traders, pilgrims, or religious mendicants. As Parimal Bhattacharya (2019) notes, “The British began to exploit this chink. They sent spies into Tibet disguised as Buddhist monks in secret and dangerous missions. These spies were called Pundits.” Lieutenant-General Thomas Montgomerie of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India conceived the system, recognizing that Indians from border regions possessed the cultural knowledge, linguistic skills, and physical appearance to operate undetected.

The Pundit system ingeniously fused scientific methodology with clandestine operations. Recruits, chosen from hill people with existing Tibetan connections, underwent intensive training in surveying, celestial navigation, and distance measurement at the Survey’s headquarters in Dehradun (Hopkirk 1990). Religious and cultural artifacts were adapted for intelligence: prayer wheels contained hidden compartments for maps and notes, Buddhist rosaries were altered to 100 beads (instead of 108) for precise pace counting, compasses were concealed in prayer wheel drums, and walking sticks were hollowed for bribes (Bhattacharya 2019, 124).

However, the Pundit system had limitations. While early Pundits excelled at geographical mapping, they lacked the formal education and cultural sophistication for detailed ethnographic and political intelligence. Their reports, though cartographically valuable, offered superficial insights into Tibetan society, politics, and religion.

Das's recruitment marked an evolution in British intelligence, combining the Pundit system's access with an educated, English-speaking agent's analytical capabilities. His appointment as headmaster of the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling in 1874 was likely a strategic move to position him for intelligence work. The school served as a cover for his Tibetan language studies and a recruitment center. Das's engineering education provided technical skills for surveying, and his educator role offered an intellectual framework for cultural and political analysis. His Bengali Hindu background, while different from typical Pundits, was advantageous in Tibet, where Indian Buddhist scholars were historically welcomed.

The institutional framework supporting Das extended beyond the Survey of India to a network of colonial officials, scholars, and administrators. Sir Alfred Croft, Director of Public Instruction for Bengal, mentored Das and secured government support for his missions. This high-level involvement underscores the colonial government's emphasis on sophisticated intelligence in Tibet.

Das's recruitment coincided with heightened British concern over Russian activities in Central Asia. The Second Afghan War (1878–1880) exposed vulnerabilities on India's northwestern frontier, and Russian activities in Chinese Turkestan and Mongolia suggested an immediate threat to Tibet (Hopkirk 1990). Detailed intelligence on Tibet's political structures, military capabilities, and susceptibility to foreign influence became urgent.

This shift toward sophisticated cultural intelligence reflected changes in colonial administrative practices after the 1857 Indian Rebellion, which highlighted the dangers of governing without understanding local cultures (*ibid*). Ethnographic knowledge became a tool of imperial control, creating opportunities for individuals like Das who could combine intelligence with scholarly analysis. However, integrating ethnographic observation with espionage created profound ethical dilemmas, thereby defining Das's legacy. The Pundit system involved deception, but sophisticated ethnographic work demanded deeper betrayals of trust. Das's relationships with Tibetan scholars, particularly Lama Sengchen Dorjechen, exemplified the tragic costs of this approach.

The Great Game also shaped the reception of Das's ethnographic observations. His reports were initially classified, limiting scholarly peer review. When published, they were often read for intelligence value rather than ethnographic contributions.

Sarat Chandra Das: The Spy-cum-Ethnographer

Sarat Chandra Das's dual identity as a spy and ethnographer is central to understanding his contributions and controversies. His ethnographic work, though often overshadowed by his intelligence activities, provides invaluable insights into nineteenth-century Tibetan society and religion. Das's unique position allowed him to gather detailed cultural information that traditional Pundit spies could not.

Das's methodological approach combined rigorous observation with linguistic proficiency. Fluent in Tibetan, he immersed himself in monastic life, gaining access to rituals and practices rarely witnessed by outsiders. His detailed descriptions of ceremonies, monastic hierarchies, and daily religious life are a testament to his ethnographic skill. For instance, his accounts of the Chöd ritual, a tantric practice involving visualization and self-sacrifice, provide a rare glimpse into its performance and significance during his time.

However, Das's ethnographic work was inherently compromised by his clandestine mission. His observations were filtered through the lens of British imperial interests, and his primary objective was intelligence gathering, not purely academic inquiry. This raises questions about the objectivity and completeness of his ethnographic records. Scholars like Alex McKay have highlighted how Das's reports often prioritized information useful for colonial administration, such

as political structures and trade routes, over purely cultural details.

Despite these limitations, Das's contributions to Tibetan studies are undeniable. He meticulously documented Tibetan language, literature, and religious texts, compiling dictionaries and grammars that remain foundational resources. His *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1902) was a monumental achievement, facilitating future scholarship on Tibetan culture. His writings also provided early insights into the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, its monastic institutions, and its influence on Tibetan society.

Das's personal relationships with Tibetan lamas and scholars, particularly Lama Sengchen Dorjechen, were complex and ultimately tragic. Dorjechen, a high-ranking lama and Das's primary informant, was executed by Tibetan authorities after Das's espionage activities were exposed. This incident underscores the profound ethical dilemmas inherent in Das's dual role and the devastating consequences of his actions for those who trusted him. The betrayal of trust, while serving imperial interests, casts a long shadow over his scholarly legacy.

His work, though valuable, must be read critically, acknowledging the context of colonial power dynamics and the inherent biases of an intelligence operative. Nevertheless, Das's ethnographic accounts offer a unique historical snapshot of Tibetan Buddhism before the dramatic political changes

of the twentieth century, making them an indispensable, if problematic, resource for contemporary scholars.

Tibetan Buddhist Rituals: Continuity and Transformation

Sarat Chandra Das's ethnographic accounts provide a crucial historical baseline for understanding Tibetan Buddhist rituals. His detailed observations of ceremonies, festivals, and daily monastic practices offer insights into the form and function of these rituals in nineteenth-century Tibet. This section examines the specific rituals Das documented and traces their continuity and transformation within contemporary Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist communities, particularly in Sikkim and Darjeeling.

Das meticulously described various rituals, from elaborate monastic ceremonies to household rites. For example, he provided extensive details on the Cham dance, a sacred masked dance performed by monks to subjugate evil spirits and impart Buddhist teachings. His descriptions often included the specific deities invoked, the costumes worn, the musical instruments used, and the symbolic meanings of the movements. These accounts are invaluable for comparing historical practices with their modern manifestations.

Another significant ritual documented by Das was the Mani Rimdu festival, a complex series of ceremonies performed to bless the local community and ensure harmony. His writings

detail the preparations, the chanting, the offerings, and the public performances, highlighting the communal aspect of Tibetan Buddhism. Similarly, he described the daily routines of monastic life, including morning prayers, debates, and meditation sessions, providing a comprehensive picture of the religious landscape.

Comparing Das's observations with contemporary ethnographic data reveals both remarkable continuities and significant transformations. Many of the core rituals, such as the Cham dance and various puja (prayer) ceremonies, continue to be performed today with recognizable elements. The iconography, chanting styles, and ritual implements often retain strong resemblances to Das's descriptions, indicating a deep-rooted preservation of tradition. This continuity is particularly evident in established monasteries in Sikkim and Darjeeling, which have served as custodians of Tibetan Buddhist heritage.

However, transformations are also apparent, driven by factors such as exile, modernization, and interaction with other cultures. The Tibetan diaspora, particularly after the 1959 Chinese invasion, led to the relocation of many lamas and practitioners to India, including the Eastern Himalayas. This displacement necessitated adaptations in ritual performance, sometimes due to resource limitations or the need to integrate into new social contexts. For instance, some elaborate rituals

may have been condensed or simplified in smaller, newly established centers compared with their historical grandeur.

Furthermore, the meaning and social significance of certain rituals have evolved. While historically some rituals may have been primarily focused on appeasing local deities or ensuring agricultural prosperity, contemporary practices often emphasize broader themes of peace, compassion, and global well-being, reflecting the universalistic aspirations of modern Buddhism. The role of rituals in fostering cultural identity and resilience among displaced communities has also gained prominence.

Ultimately, the persistence and transformation of these rituals demonstrate the adaptive capacity of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite historical upheavals and geographical displacement, the core practices documented by Das have not only survived but have been actively reinterpreted and revitalized, ensuring their continued relevance for new generations of practitioners in the Eastern Himalayas.

The Legacy of Sarat Chandra Das: A Contested Figure

Sarat Chandra Das remains a highly contested figure in both Tibetan studies and the history of colonial intelligence. His legacy is marked by the tension between his undeniable scholarly contributions and the ethical compromises inherent in his role as a spy. Understanding this duality is crucial for a nuanced appreciation of his work.

On one hand, Das's meticulous documentation of Tibetan language, culture, and religion provided an unprecedented wealth of information to the Western world. His dictionaries, grammar works, and ethnographic accounts were foundational for early Tibetan studies, enabling subsequent generations of scholars to engage with Tibetan civilization. Without his efforts, much of this knowledge might have remained inaccessible, particularly given Tibet's isolationist policies at the time. His work is still cited today for its historical value and detailed observations.

On the other hand, Das's espionage activities had severe and lasting negative consequences. The exposure of his true mission led to a crackdown by Tibetan authorities, resulting in the persecution and execution of his Tibetan collaborators, most notably Lama Sengchen Dorjechen. This tragic outcome highlights the profound human cost of colonial intelligence gathering and the betrayal of trust that characterized Das's relationships with his informants. His actions contributed to Tibet's increased suspicion of foreigners, further entrenching its isolation and making future scholarly engagement more difficult.

Moreover, Das's work, like much colonial scholarship, was embedded within a power dynamic that served imperial interests. His observations were not purely objective; they were shaped by the British desire for intelligence on a strategically

important region. This context raises questions about the inherent biases in his ethnographic descriptions and the potential for misrepresentation or selective reporting to serve political ends. Scholars continue to debate the extent to which his ethnographic insights were distorted by his intelligence agenda.

Despite these ethical complexities, Das's story offers valuable lessons for contemporary research, particularly in sensitive cultural contexts. It underscores the importance of ethical considerations in fieldwork, the need for transparency in research objectives, and the potential for unintended consequences when academic pursuits are intertwined with political agendas. His life serves as a cautionary tale about the responsibilities of researchers when engaging with vulnerable communities.

In conclusion, Sarat Chandra Das's legacy is a complex tapestry woven from threads of pioneering scholarship, colonial intrigue, and profound ethical dilemmas. While his contributions to Tibetan studies are undeniable, they are forever linked to the tragic outcomes of his espionage. His work continues to be a vital, albeit problematic, resource for understanding nineteenth-century Tibet and the intricate relationship between knowledge production and imperial power. Future research must continue to critically engage with his writings, acknowledging both their immense value

and their inherent limitations, to fully grasp the historical and cultural landscape he sought to document.

Sarat Chandra Das: Ethnographer and the Ethics of Research

Sarat Chandra Das's unique position as both a British intelligence agent and a pioneering scholar of Tibetan language and culture presents a compelling, yet complex, case study in the ethics of ethnographic research. While his clandestine activities inevitably cast a significant shadow over his legacy, the scholarly contributions he made to early Tibetan studies remain indisputable, necessitating a critical examination of the dual character of his work and its ethical ramifications.

Das was not simply an explorer or traveler; he was a linguist, lexicographer, ethnographer, and Tibetologist. His expeditions into Tibet, conducted ostensibly for geographical and literary research purposes, were in fact undertaken under the auspices of the Indian Foreign Office, with a substantial portion of his non-literary work withheld from public disclosure. This intrinsic duality meant that Das's ethnographic observations, though detailed and extensive, were inextricably intertwined with his intelligence-gathering mandate.

Methodologically, Das employed practices akin to deep immersion and linguistic proficiency, gaining fluency in Tibetan and thereby accessing monastic life and cultural practices

seldom available to outsiders. His meticulous documentation of Tibetan rituals, social customs, and quotidian life provides a rich, albeit filtered, portrait of nineteenth-century Tibetan society. His seminal works, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (1902) and the *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1902), stand as enduring testaments to his scholarly output and continue to underpin subsequent Tibetological scholarship.

However, the ethical implications arising from Das's work are profound and far-reaching. His reliance on deception, disguising himself as a Buddhist monk to gain access to Tibetan society, constitutes a fundamental breach of the principles of informed consent and transparency. Which are cornerstones of contemporary ethnographic research. The resultant consequences of his exposure were tragic: the persecution and execution of his Tibetan collaborators, including prominent lamas who had extended their hospitality and trust to Das. Such outcomes starkly underscore the devastating real-world impacts of ethical violations in research. As noted by British diplomat Charles Bell, Das's "clandestine entry and his surreptitious inquiries constituted... the chief causes which led Tibetans to suspect British intentions with regard to their country." Further testimony by Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese Buddhist monk and disciple of Das, elaborated the severe repercussions faced by those who assisted him, including property confiscation and execution.

This historical episode foregrounds critical ethical considerations that contemporary researchers must rigorously observe. Foremost is the imperative of informed consent and transparency. Ethical research mandates that participants be fully apprised of the researcher's identity, objectives, and the nature of the study, including any attendant risks. Das's covert approach which constitute a fundamental violation of these tenets entailed deception that not only breached participant trust but exposed them to significant harm. This underscores the indispensable requirement for openness and honesty in all scholarly endeavors.

Equally paramount is the principle of harm minimization. Particularly salient in ethnographic contexts, where participants often disclose intimate and sensitive information, researchers bear an ethical obligation to prioritize participant welfare. Das's activities, propelled by imperial interests rather than purely academic pursuits, had devastating consequences for the Tibetan communities involved, manifesting in imprisonment, dispossession, and death for those who provided him assistance. This reality reinforces the necessity for researchers to remain vigilant against the potential for their work to precipitate harm, especially when research intersects with political or intelligence agendas.

Moreover, Das's dual role as both scholar and spy embodies a significant conflict of interest, raising concerns regarding

research integrity and objectivity. Such dual allegiances engender bias and erode the credibility of ethnographic findings. It is imperative that researchers maintain clear and impermeable boundaries between scholarly inquiry and any external affiliations that might compromise ethical standards or community trust.

The issue of accountability extends beyond immediate research interactions to encompass broader socio-political consequences. Das's actions contributed to heightened paranoia toward foreigners within Tibetan society, exacerbating political isolation. This underscores the critical responsibility scholars bear not only for the conduct of their research but also for anticipating and mitigating broader ramifications stemming from their findings and methods.

While acknowledging that Das's work yielded valuable historical and linguistic data, these ethical shortcomings serve as a cautionary exemplar for contemporary scholarship. They underscore the principle that the pursuit of knowledge, regardless of its significance, cannot be disentangled from rigorous ethical commitment. Particularly in contexts involving vulnerable or politically sensitive populations, the maintenance of trust, transparency, and respect is paramount; their breach risks profound and lasting harm that transcends scholarly benefit.

Modern ethical guidelines and codes of conduct in ethnographic and qualitative research emphasize principles

that address these concerns: transparency, genuine informed consent, protection of participant welfare, careful delineation of researcher roles, and accountability for wider societal impact. Researchers are expected to secure informed consent wherein participants understand their involvement, retain the right to refuse or withdraw without penalty, and are afforded anonymity and confidentiality to safeguard against harm. Risks should be minimized with sensitivity to cultural, power, and political dynamics.

Ethical vigilance is particularly critical given the immersive nature of ethnographic research that often entails extensive engagement with communities over prolonged periods. Researchers must exercise flexibility in interpreting ethical principles to respond to unforeseen field circumstances, ensuring continuous consent and ethical oversight. Institutional review boards and community consultation mechanisms further support ethical adherence.

Lastly, contemporary scholars must guard against “ethics dumping,” whereby research is relocated to settings with lax ethical oversight or marginalized populations to circumvent robust standards. Engaging local communities and stakeholders actively during research design, implementation, and dissemination fosters fairness, respect, and accountability. Inclusion of local participants in authorship or acknowledgment addresses power imbalances and recognizes their contribution.

In summation, the historical case of Sarat Chandra Das remains a potent exemplification of the inseparability of ethical rigor from scholarly endeavor in ethnography and anthropology. The researcher-participant relationship is inherently fragile; its violation yields severe and lasting repercussions. Upholding ethical standards not only protects research participants but also enhances the integrity and societal relevance of scholarship, particularly within sensitive cultural and political milieus. Core principles, which includes respect, transparency, harm minimization, clear role differentiation, and accountability, must guide all ethnographic research to ensure responsible and humane pursuit of knowledge. This ethical framework is vital to balancing the advancement of knowledge with the protection of human dignity, with lessons from historical breaches providing indispensable guidance for future research.

Conclusion

Sarat Chandra Das's role as both a British intelligence agent and a pioneering scholar of Tibetan language and culture presents a deeply complex and instructive case in the ethics of ethnographic research. His scholarly contributions to Tibetan studies are undoubtedly significant; however, they were complicated by his covert political activities, which continue to provoke debate about the responsibilities and consequences of research conducted under imperial auspices.

Das was more than an explorer; he was a linguist, lexicographer, ethnographer, and Tibetologist. His journeys into Tibet, officially framed as scholarly and geographical research missions, were in fact undertaken under the directive of the Indian Foreign Office. Much of his intelligence-related work remained confidential, introducing a duality into his role that blurred the lines between academic inquiry and espionage. This dual role meant that his ethnographic observations, while extensive and detailed, were inseparable from his intelligence objectives, which shaped what he recorded and how it was used. From a methodological perspective, Das demonstrated deep immersion in Tibetan culture through his linguistic fluency, which granted him access to monastic life and rituals typically hidden from outsiders. His detailed accounts of Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies, social customs, and everyday monastic practices provide an invaluable snapshot of nineteenth-century Tibetan society. Works such as *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (1902) and his *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1902) remain foundational texts within Tibetology.

Nonetheless, the ethical challenges stemming from Das's methods are stark. His reliance on deception, disguising himself as a Buddhist monk, fundamentally violated contemporary principles of informed consent and transparency that guide ethnographic research. The consequences of his clandestine actions were tragic: the persecution and execution of some of his Tibetan collaborators—including high-ranking

lamas who had extended their hospitality and trust. British diplomat Charles Bell attributed Tibetans' growing suspicion of foreigners partly to Das's covert activities, underscoring how breaches of trust can have wide-reaching and lasting repercussions. Additional testimony by Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese Buddhist monk and disciple of Das, details the severe consequences that included property confiscation and executions, suffered by those who assisted him.

This historical episode highlights critical ethical imperatives that modern researchers must rigorously uphold. Foremost among these is informed consent and transparency. Ethical research demands that participants clearly understand the researcher's identity, intentions, the nature of the study, and any risks. Deception, as employed by Das, breaches this foundational trust, exposing participants to potential harm and undermining the integrity of the research process.

Closely linked is the principle of harm minimization. Ethnographic research often engages with intimate, sensitive aspects of participants' lives, requiring researchers to prioritize their safety and well-being. Das's imperial-driven endeavors led to serious human cost for the communities involved, imprisonment, dispossession, and death. Such outcomes warn against the dangers of research entangled with political or intelligence objectives, urging contemporary scholars to remain vigilant about the broader consequences of their work.

The conflict of interest inherent in Das's dual identity as scholar and spy further complicates the ethical landscape. Such conflicting roles jeopardize objectivity, credibility, and community trust. Contemporary researchers must maintain strict boundaries between academic inquiry and any outside commitments that could bias or compromise their responsibilities, lest the research lose its legitimacy.

Accountability extends beyond immediate fieldwork to include the broader social and political effects of research. Das's activities contributed to heightened mistrust toward foreigners among Tibetans, leading to increased isolation that hindered subsequent scholarly and cultural exchanges. Researchers bear a duty to anticipate and reflect on the wider implications of their methods and findings on the communities studied.

Though Das's ethnographic work yielded important historical and linguistic insights, his ethical failings serve as a cautionary lesson for contemporary scholarship. The pursuit of knowledge must be inseparable from an unwavering commitment to ethical standards. In politically or culturally sensitive contexts, maintaining transparency, respect, and trust is paramount; breaches in these areas inflict damage that often outweighs academic gains.

Modern ethical guidelines for ethnographic research emphasize transparency, genuine informed consent, protection of participant welfare, clear role delineation, and responsibility for

broader societal impacts. Researchers are expected to secure informed consent that empowers participants to understand the research and withdraw freely without penalty. Safeguards such as confidentiality and anonymity are critical to prevent harm, particularly within vulnerable populations.

Ethical practice also requires adaptability, as ethnographers engage deeply over extended periods and face unpredictable field conditions. Continuous consent and regular ethical review through institutional boards and community consultation support integrity throughout the research lifecycle.

Further, researchers must guard against “ethics dumping,” avoiding relocations to contexts with weaker oversight or marginalized populations simply to bypass stringent ethical standards. Collaboration with local stakeholders throughout research design and dissemination encourages mutual respect and accountability, while authorship inclusion and acknowledgment of local participants help correct power imbalances.

In summary, Sarat Chandra Das’s life and work represent a powerful exemplar of the inseparability of ethics from scholarship in anthropology and ethnography. The fragile trust between researcher and community demands rigorous protection, as its violation produces profound and enduring consequences. Upholding ethical standards not only safeguards participants but enhances the credibility and societal relevance

of research. Principles of respect, transparency, minimization of harm, clear role boundaries, and accountability must underpin all ethnographic work to ensure that the pursuit of knowledge proceeds with humanity and responsibility. Lessons from Das's story offer crucial guidance for future research practices, underscoring that advancing understanding must always be balanced with protecting human dignity.

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Recentring Exile: Post-Memory and Resistance from Darjeeling

**Nimu Sherpa
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Abstract

The paper aims to broaden the understanding of the Tibetan diaspora beyond Dharamsala, bringing into visibility the neglected geography of Tibetan exile and recentring the Darjeeling Hills. This paper focuses on the often-overlooked aspect of the Tibetan diaspora, examining how post-memory persists in Darjeeling. The locus of Dharamsala overwhelmingly dominates the global narrative of the Tibetan diaspora. While undeniably central, this focus often eclipses other significant sites of Tibetan exile, creating a monolithic understanding of a diverse and geographically scattered community. This paper seeks to challenge this singular narrative by recentring the Darjeeling Hills as a pivotal, albeit neglected, geography in the Tibetan exile experience. The Darjeeling Hills hold a significant portion of Tibetan history, which the paper proposes to foreground through their age-old connection to Tibet via trade routes, monastic ties, and the longstanding reception of Tibetan refugees in exile. The paper examines the lived experiences of refugees, their assimilation and departure from regional culture, and their cultural resilience driven by

post-memory in exile. The research methodology will employ participant observation and interviews, as well as archival records, ethnographic understanding, and exile literature, informed by the theoretical lens of post-memory.

Keywords: Tibet, Exile, Refugees, Darjeeling, post-memory.

The study of the Tibetan diaspora has garnered considerable scholarly attention, particularly since the 1990s, as researchers have examined the political, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of exile following the 1959 Tibetan uprising and the subsequent exodus to India, Nepal, and other countries. Much of this scholarship has understandably centred on Dharamsala, widely regarded as the symbolic heart of the Tibetan exile community, which breeds the notion that Tibetan migration and diaspora essentially limit itself within the confines of Dharamsala, as the dominant narrative around Dharamsala as the epicentre of Tibetan exile identity is profoundly shaped by the presence of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration, which naturally garners global attention. Today, I deviate slightly from the norm and step outside the hegemonic structure to trace the history of the Tibetan diaspora beyond Dharamsala. Because this focus on Dharamsala, though significant, has resulted in the marginalization of other equally essential sites of Tibetan settlement, such as Darjeeling, which is a considerable lacuna often overlooked when it comes to exile identity. I propose

a re-centring of Darjeeling within the historical geography of Tibetan exile. Not to pose a challenge but to bring into visibility the lesser-known historical site within the broader tapestry of Tibetan exile history.

To maintain the study's precision, I propose providing a case study of the Tibetan refugees within Darjeeling town, tracing the historical and socio-cultural significance of Tibetan settlement in Darjeeling. I believe this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of exile identity, one that is shaped not solely by political exile but also by cultural preservation and human memory, thereby broadening the notion of Tibetan exile history and identity.

Methodology

As for the methodology, my study is primarily based on participant observation and interviews. I have referred to both primary and secondary data. I have interviewed four individuals across different age groups, ranging from 26 to 60, which includes an array of perspectives. The research is informed by both academic inquiry and my positionality as a native of Darjeeling, which enables a unique insider-outsider perspective to examine the lived experiences of Tibetan refugees in exile.

Objectives

Darjeeling is home to a multi-generational Tibetan community whose story of survival, cultural preservation, and identity formation offers a unique lens through which to understand the complexities of long-term displacement, for which three research questions animate the study:

1. How has Darjeeling historically functioned as a nexus between Tibet and the Indian subcontinent?
2. In what ways do oral archives and intergenerational memory sustain Tibetan identity in Darjeeling?
3. How do assimilation, departure, and economic resilience shape the lived experiences of Tibetan exiles in the Darjeeling Hills?

Darjeeling and Pre-Exilic Ties with Tibet

Long before the 1959 exodus, Darjeeling and its surrounding areas served as a crucial contact zone between Tibet and British India. Connected through trade routes, shared Buddhist traditions, and even providing refuge to the 13th Dalai Lama in 1910, this region has a deep, pre-exilic connection to Tibet. My first proposition dates back to 1910, when the 13th Dalai Lama was exiled to Darjeeling, in a place known as ‘Hill Side’, where the great 13th Dalai Lama, Thupten Gyatso (1876–1933), spent his exile in India between 1910 and 1912, owing

to Qing militancy caused by Chinese aggression against Tibet at that time. The original house had long collapsed, leaving nothing except the foundation. The house where the 13th Dalai Lama resided during that time was known as ‘Hillside’, which is now the exact location of the Tibetan Self-Help Centre (Rai 2023, 11).

The validity of the Dalai Lama’s stay at Hillside can be traced from different travelogues and books written during that time. Excerpts from books validate that the 13th Dalai Lama resided in Hillside, which is the centre that exists at present. The most relevant source can be found in the excerpt of E. C. Dozey’s, which reads:

In 1910, the Dalai Lama, owing to an invasion of Tibet by the Chinese, had to flee for his life to Darjeeling and seek the protection of the British Government. When he reached Hillside (Dozey 1953, 303).

Another piece of evidence can be traced from an excerpt from Nicholas Roerich’s travel diary *Altai Himalaya*, 1924. While on his visit to Darjeeling, he was blessed to stay in the same Hillside home where the 13th Dalai Lama resided in 1910, and he writes in his diary:

Just here lived the Dalai Lama during his long flight from Lasha. For us, the house is just what we need... Not on one occasion only were we awakened by the chanting

and the rhythmic beats around the house. 'These are the lamas who, bowing to the ground many times, marched around our dwelling...' (Roerich 1929, 13–14).

Likewise, excerpts from Sir Charles's book *Tibet Past and Present*, where he mentions the 13th Dalai Lama (1910–1912). His book testifies about his duties entrusted to him with His Holiness's visit:

The Indian Foreign Office appreciated the position and allowed me to place at His Holiness's disposal a house with retired grounds on the outskirts of Darjeeling, and to give him periodical presents of food and other things by Tibetan custom (Bell 1924, 110).

Similarly, in another instance, E. C. Dozey made an entry about the 13th Dalai Lama:

He does not like going out into the streets in Lasha, as his presence draws the crowds. In Darjeeling, he would take regular exercise and might sometimes be seen on the paths in Birch Hill Forest, accompanied by a single servant...To the Europeans and Indians in Darjeeling, he was almost unknown, and those who met him were unlikely to recognize him (Dozey 1953, 128).

He writes:

In the room below his at 'Hillside' Darjeeling, the low

tone of his Holiness's voice would continually be heard calling out blessings on suffering humanity, and not on humanity only, but on birds and beasts and whole animate creation (Dozey 1953, 131).

E. C. Dozey writes:

From 1910 to 1912, I saw a great deal of the Dalai Lama, his Ministers, and other officers when these fled to Darjeeling, and had during this period frequent private conversations with His Holiness. In 1913–14, I found myself in Shimla and Delhi, attending a conference between Great Britain, China, and Tibet, convened to settle the political status of Tibet (Dozey 1953, 3–4).

There are records of the Dalai Lama's stay at Hillside and his eventual return to Lhasa in July 1912, following the removal of Chinese troops from the land. The refuge of the 13th Dalai Lama and his subsequent return to Lhasa hold precedence for his return to Tibet. Thus, the refugee centre is also significant in tracing Tibet's political history. It is a confluence of history and transition, which brings both its bitter and sweet memories together.

Trade Route Ties

Darjeeling's connection with Tibet predates the 1959 exile. The name itself was derived from the monastery constructed in the hills of Mahakal Darjeeling, by a Tibetan lama named 'Dorjee

Ling-Pa' who had built a monastery named 'Do-chug-gompa'. It is believed that the name Darjeeling is derived from the name of the "Dorjee Ling Pa." A translation of the place name will be Dorjee, which is Bajra (thunderbolt), and the meaning of Ling is (place), as per the Tibetan language, which becomes a 'place of thunderbolts'. However, in 1780, the Gorkha soldiers demolished the monastery and built a temple in its place. The same monastery, later in 1818, was shifted to Bhotia Busty, which again got destroyed in the big earthquake of 15 January, 1934 (Rai 2023, 11).

Situated at the crossroads of the Himalayas, particularly Darjeeling, historically thrived as a hub for Indo-Tibetan trade. Caravans carrying wool, salt, and horses from Tibet descended through the Nathu La and Jelep La passes into Kalimpong and Darjeeling, where they exchanged goods such as wool, yak products, salt, medicinal herbs, incense, and religious artifacts for Indian textiles, tea, spices, and British-manufactured items. "The imports consisted of salt, gold, silver, precious stones, and coarse woollen stuffs. The principal import was wool. The flocks of Tibet are very numerous, and the wool is of the finest quality" (Sen 1989, 22). Likewise, many Tibetan migrants continue to establish a strong hold in the business and tourism industries in Darjeeling, which speaks volumes about the enduring trade legacy. This economic exchange cemented Darjeeling as a cosmopolitan town where Tibetan traders, Nepali labourers, and British

planters coexisted. Historically, considering Darjeeling's strategic location, Sir William Benedict reacted to General Lloyd's request to negotiate the cession of Darjeeling with the then Raja of Sikkim, Chador Namgyal. In 1835, Darjeeling was leased to British India by Sikkim, marking the inception of Darjeeling as a sanatorium. Darjeeling eventually worked as a centre to explore the northeastern frontiers, of which Alastair Lamb states:

The cession of Darjeeling was an event of the greatest importance in the history of the northern frontier of India. Not only did it place the British in close contact with the hill states, their peoples, and their politics, but it also provided a constant reminder of the possibilities of trade with Tibet (Lamb 1960, 103).

Charles Bell also testified that “half of the entire trade between Tibet and India had passed through this thriving town” (Bell 1924, 113). W. B. Jackson of the Bengal Civil Service submitted an encouraging report published in 1854 on the trade between Darjeeling and Tibet, which states that “Despite many restrictions and duties, the trade with Tibet on the Sikkim route had a value of Rs. 50,000 annually. The report suggested that British manufactures could be exchanged for Tibetan gold, salt, and wool” (W. B. Jackson, Report 1854). The overwhelming majority of the Tibetan refugees later used the Lasha-Phari-Jelp-La Kalimpong route, which also served

as an entry point to India, during the occupation of Tibet by communist China: “A large group of the refugees, particularly those settled in the Darjeeling–Sikkim Himalaya before 1959 took the route which starts at Phari, crosses the Chumbi Valley, enters Sikkim through the Jelp La Pass and connects Kalimpong via north-eastern Sikkim” (Subba 1990, 20).

Monastic Ties

The spiritual ties between Tibet and Darjeeling are equally significant. Monasteries became sites of trans-Himalayan Buddhist transmission, hosting lamas trained in Tibet and Nepal. Several reincarnate lamas found refuge in Darjeeling following Chinese incursions into Tibet, transforming the region into a sacred landscape that preserves the continuity of Tibetan Buddhism. The scattered settlement in Darjeeling has all four major Buddhist traditions’ monasteries, with various numbers of their branches within Darjeeling and nearby areas, of which the oldest is the Bhutia Busty Monastery.

Like other parts of the Himalayan belt, Darjeeling is also considered a refuge of age-old cultural-religious practices of Tibetan Buddhism; therefore, the monasteries have historically penetrated and embedded themselves into the local culture, society, and ecology, which is reflected in the present day. The religion consists of different sects (Nyingmapa, Kagyupa, Sakya Pa, and Gelugpa). It is commonly known as Northern Buddhism, which is basically Mahayana Buddhism as practiced

in Tibet. Toni Huber, in the book *The Holy Land Reborn*, clearly indicates how Tibetans have maintained a ritual relationship to the Indian Himalayas, particularly by way of pilgrimage, and what it means for them to consider India as their holy land (Huber 2006).

Sakya Guru Monastery, or the Ghoom Monastery (1875), established in the 18th century, reflects centuries of Tibetan Buddhist presence. Sakya Guru Monastery was the very first monastery he founded in exile. It is a prominent centre for the Sakya Pa school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Yiga Choeling Monastery, also known as the Old Ghoom Monastery, is situated on the Ghoom Main Road. This is a Gelugpa sect or the Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism and is known for its 15-foot (4.6 m) high statue of the Maitreya Buddha.

Druk Thupten Sangag Choeling Monastery belongs to the Drukpa Kagyu Order (Kagyued Sect) of Tibetan Buddhism. It is based at Hill Cart Road, Dali, popularly known as Dali Monastery to locals and tourists. The first Ven. Kyabje Thuksey Rinpoche formally built it in 1971. The monastery has a Naropa Retreat Centre branch at Chetrey, Darjeeling, located near the Indo-Nepal Border. This monastery is the largest in the area, in terms of the headcount of residential monks in Darjeeling.

Phuntsok Ngayab Choekhorling Monastery in Jorebunglow belongs to the Nyingmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhist Tradition. H. E. Ven. Jadrel Sangye Dorjee Rinpoche is originally from Kham Kathog in Tibet, before he visited Darjeeling and took charge of the monastery.

The presence of Buddhist monasteries and the continuation of traditional arts and traditions testify to cultural resilience. During the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, many high-ranking Lamas and abbots fled to India and took refuge in this monastery.

Settlement

The 1959 Tibetan uprising and the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama marked the beginning of a new phase in the Tibetan diaspora in Darjeeling. Alongside Dharamsala, Bylakuppe, and other settlements, Darjeeling absorbed waves of refugees, many of whom worked in the handicraft industry, as menial workers in road construction, and as seasonal labourers in the tea plantations. Unlike the politically orchestrated settlements elsewhere, the Tibetan community in Darjeeling developed more organically, woven into the multiethnic fabric of the hills. The Tibetan Settlement in Darjeeling was established in the early 1960s, when a large number of Tibetan guerrilla warriors who had struggled against the Chinese invasion in Lhasa (Tibet) came into exile. Initially, Tibetans were scattered in three significant locations, including the main

town of Darjeeling, Lama Hatta, and Pokhriabong. The first three scattered settlements, including the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre (TRSHC), were established in October 1959. In 1961, with some 90-person (Subba 1990, 43) guerrilla warrior families, were resettled in Lama Hatta within an area of 7.11 acres of land. The separate settlement at Sonada was also established later in January 1965, initially accommodating 277 persons (Subba 1990, 43).

“The initial population recorded in Darjeeling was 602, which has now increased to 1,681 as per official records. Over time, Tibetans have spread across Darjeeling, but the largest population is still concentrated in Darjeeling town itself” (Tibetan Settlement Office, Darjeeling 2025).

Post-Memory

This paper argues that the endurance of the Tibetan community in Darjeeling is fuelled not by direct memory of the homeland for its younger generations, but by post-memory. This inherited trauma and nostalgia, transmitted through stories, rituals, and material culture, shape their identity and inform their subtle acts of cultural resistance. By examining the lived experiences of Tibetans in Darjeeling, we can articulate a more nuanced geography of exile, one that acknowledges the quiet, persistent ways a community sustains itself far from its homeland. The paper relies primarily on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of post-memory, which refers to the transmission of

traumatic memory across generations. Post-memory allows us to analyse how younger Tibetans in Darjeeling, born in exile, continue to carry the memories of Tibet they never directly experienced. For Tibetan exiles in Darjeeling, post-memory sustains cultural identity among younger generations born outside Tibet who are descendants of trauma survivors who inherit collective memories of their parents and grandparents. The concept of post-memory provides a crucial framework for understanding how a community sustains its cultural identity in the absence of a homeland. Memory transmission occurs through oral storytelling, ritual practices, and cultural institutions. Hirsch defines post-memory as the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. She writes, “Post-memory is a powerful and particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (Hirsch 2012, 5).

Twenty-seven-year-old Rinchen Bhutia helps her father, Sonam Tenpa Bhutia, run a small street shop, where they sell Tibetan items like tsampa and kuchi. After completing her Bachelor’s degree at Southfield College, she is often encountered in town, standing beside her shop. She has recently enrolled in a Paramedical course at Siliguri. In her absence, her father has been standing beside their small business set-up. I am especially fascinated by Rinchen’s composure as a young

girl; she does not hesitate to run the shop and take on the responsibilities towards her parents and family. When asked, she proudly says that “this is what our Pala and Amla were doing, and it is a way for her to connect to her roots.” When asked about Tibet, she would say that “I have never seen Tibet, but Tibet is always there in my memory, in the songs, in the butter lamps, in the way my grandmother told me stories” (R. Bhutia 2025).

A 45-year-old woman named Yangchen Bhutia, who runs a Tibetan eatery named Amdo Chonay Tibetan Restaurant, which is the only Tibetan eatery in Darjeeling, started in 2014, is another vivid example. The restaurant is the go-to place for those who are fond of Tibetan food; they primarily serve momo and laphing, showcasing an indomitable post-memorial tie with Tibet. She says that she is an orphan with a very faint memory of coming to exile, but she remembers growing up in the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre. She had also initially worked in a carpet factory after her marriage to Nima Tsering Bhutia, who is 60 years old from Dharamsala. They started the Tibetan eatery in Darjeeling, which they say “is named after the village they belong to in the Amdo provinces of Tibet, called Chonay. The name holds great symbolic significance; their connection to their homeland, Tibet, endures even in exile” (Y. Bhutia 2025).

Likewise, I had a heartwarming conversation with Tenzing Bhutia, who runs Tenzing Gym in Darjeeling. Tenzing-la shares the stories of his parents, who are long passed now. They used to narrate stories about their exile and how they migrated through the Bhutan route, facing utter poverty upon reaching Darjeeling. Their parents started working as menial workers in road construction, but had raised their children well, which says a lot about their resilience. Tenzing-la is today a well-known personality and a member of different Tibetan organizations in Darjeeling. He had an opportunity to visit Tibet in 1980, but he says the Tibet his parents narrated to him is totally different from the Tibet he visited. His mother told him that their ancestral house was near the Potala Palace, and when he visited the place, it was all in ruins, which disheartened him deeply. He says, “Every Tibetan family has its own unique story to be told.” Within his own family, his mother has a story of coming to exile at the age of 14, and his father arrived when he was 12 years old through different routes, facing different struggles and stories. His father used to tell him, “I was just twelve years old, but I still remember the snow eating my feet. When I tell my children and grandchildren about the arduous journey, I tell them not just of pain but also of our strength and resilience.” However, Tenzing-la says that despite whatever has occurred in Tibet so far, to him, “Tibet is most important and the most beautiful place for him, and he still wants to remember Tibet as a place

where his dreams still live. He has a distinct fascination with the clear blue water of Tibet, which triggers his memory of his homeland even in exile” (T. Bhutia 2025).

Their identity is a complex space of negotiation between the inherited memory of Tibet and the lived reality of Darjeeling. This duality sometimes manifests as a tension between a duty to preserve the past and a desire to forge a future in the present. The first-generation Tibetans recount the treacherous journey across the Himalayas, while younger generations narrate the challenges of growing up between Tibetan and Nepali identities. It emphasizes the denial of avoiding a romanticized portrayal of exile and instead focuses on the dynamic and often challenging process of identity formation in exile.

Darjeeling as an Exilic Space

The differences and similarities with the local communities in the region have marked the reinstatement of the Tibetan diasporic community in the hills of Darjeeling. Over time, many of them see themselves in continuity and similarity to the host culture-nation. After 65 years in exile, the need to naturalize themselves in Indian soil has also been realized. A 65-year-old Tsering Dorjee, who runs a shop of Tibetan items in Darjeeling, now holds an Indian citizenship, which hints towards his assimilation into the host nation. Furthermore, he does not have any distinct memory of Tibet as he lost his parents when he was a toddler. When asked about the

photographs of his parents or any memory ties which bind him to Tibet, “he resented saying keeping the photographs of the dead people is not in their ritual, but after half an hour conversation he confessed that he too longs for Tibet and harbours a dream that he will also get to go to Tibet once in a lifetime” (T. D. Bhutia 2025).

However, assimilation is inevitable; many Tibetan youths in Darjeeling identify more with Bollywood and K-pop culture than with classical Tibetan opera, and intermarriage with the Nepali and Lepcha communities is increasingly common. While some elders fear cultural dilution, others view this assimilation as a means of survival in exile. However, post-memory ensures that even assimilated identities retain fragments of Tibet, rearticulated in new cultural expressions. Naturalization is also perceived as a threat, which can be antithetical to their aspiration to return to their homeland. The refugees generally adapted to the atmosphere of the host nation also because they only have the faint memory of their country, as T. B. Subba puts forward, “We do not remember what we do not know. Because remembering is something we do in a form of symbols, colors, taste, words, smells, etc., are part of knowing” (Subba 2022).

Many Tibetans born soon after the 1950s are the generation that remembers not from their memories but from the narration of Tibet from their parents and grandparents. Moreover,

they know about Tibet not from what they remember, but rather from what they have read and heard about it, and they rely on the memories of the older generation. For young Tibetans in Darjeeling, “Tibet” is not a lived reality but an imagined, inherited landscape built from their parents’ and grandparents’ fragmented narratives, old photographs, and stories of loss. However, the post-memorial connection to Tibetans in Darjeeling is not weaker than direct memory; rather, it is a creative and active process. It compels the youth to “remember” a life they never lived and instils a sense of responsibility to preserve the culture, language, and identity that their elders carried across the Himalayas.

It is also true that the Tibetan refugees living in and around Darjeeling, with the lingering sense of post-memory, are caught between holding on and letting go of what we call the state of utter liminality. They have to live in the host country, preserving their unique cultural and traditional traits. Dissimilation or disassociation with the culture of the host country also marks their distinctiveness in the land. Nonetheless, the Tibetan community is rich in culture and tradition, and the refugees across the world have always strived to preserve it. The preservation of their cultural identity is their way of resilience against their national and political displacement. Since their reestablishment in exile, they have tried to safeguard their cultural identity in an effort to preserve their national identity as ‘Tibetans’.

The Tibetan refugees in the Darjeeling hills, like all Tibetan refugees worldwide, reaffirm their cultural identity through their attire, music, festivals, art, and architecture. Beyond survival, Darjeeling's Tibetans embody cultural resistance through songs, thangkas, carpets, and festivals that become acts of remembrance and assertion. Tibetans born in Darjeeling participate in rituals, dances, and prayers that are part of their cultural heritage, enabling them to connect with their 'imagined homeland'. Resistance here is not militant but memorial. Even the small businesses they run are not merely economic activities but embodied memory practices. Exile becomes not merely a condition of loss but a practice of cultural resilience. Even after the political and cultural displacement of sixty-five years marked in the year 2019, they have managed to keep their cultural faith alive. They keep asserting it over time in front of world communities, making the world aware of their existence (Chettri 2020).

Conclusion

By shifting the focus from Dharamsala to Darjeeling, this paper illuminates a vital yet under-researched chapter of the Tibetan diaspora. The Darjeeling Hills are not a peripheral outpost but a foundational site where the story of Tibetan exile has been unfolding for generations. The younger generations in Darjeeling, through their engagement with craft, commerce, and community rituals, perform an active

and creative act of remembrance. Their lives are a testament to the enduring power of inherited memory to shape identity, foster resilience, and fuel a quiet but profound resistance against cultural erasure. This research ultimately calls for a more pluralistic and geographically sensitive understanding of diaspora, recognizing that the spirit of a nation can be powerfully preserved in the small, everyday acts of its scattered people.

Darjeeling's role is frequently relegated to a historical footnote, a temporary sanctuary, or a transit point so far. This paper builds on regional histories of Darjeeling that allude to its transnational connections, foregrounding it as a continuous site of Tibetan cultural and social life for over a century. By recentring Darjeeling, this paper complicates the geography of Tibetan exile. Darjeeling is not merely a peripheral settlement but a vital archive of memory, identity, and resilience. Through oral archives, cultural practices, and economic strategies, Tibetans in Darjeeling sustain their identity across generations, embodying post-memory as lived experience. Exile here is dynamic, shaped by trauma, resilience, and adaptation, reminding us that the Tibetan diaspora is plural, diverse, and geographically dispersed. The paper articulates a more nuanced geography of exile, one that acknowledges the quiet, persistent ways a community sustains itself far from its homeland. Darjeeling thus emerges as an exilic space where Tibet is simultaneously absent and profoundly present.

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Cartographies of Loss: Mapping the Forgotten Tibet through Exile Monasteries in India

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Abstract

Every border or frontier is very important from a political perspective, and safeguarding it is considered a national imperative. But it is not easy for every country to be territorial or to retain its integrity forever, and hence we find countries like Tibet now present only in collective memories, which includes Tibetans in exile, a significant number of them in India. The Tibetan diaspora is prominently visible in places like Darjeeling in West Bengal, Odisha, Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh, and elsewhere. They have carried their culture, religion, and language with them. Tibetans, though exiled, have played an important role in fostering Buddhism all around the world. In India, many monasteries have been constructed, but in this paper, we will be focusing on the Palyul monastery, the main one being the Namdroling Monastery in Bylakuppe, Mysore. The monastery was founded by His Holiness the 3rd Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche, also known as Penor Rinpoche, in 1963, after he left Tibet in 1959. The monastery has been open to monks and nuns to study and practice Buddhist teachings and philosophy. It serves as one of the most

important centres for preserving Tibetan identity and religious heritage. This paper, therefore, tries to examine how such an institution functions like a cartography of forgotten Tibet, beyond physical boundaries. Existing Tibetan culture, religion, and language have thrived in India through monasteries like Namdroling, where they have been conserved and protected and, therefore, have transformed and continue to flourish. The monastery reflects a reimagined homeland that is no longer visible on maps but continues to live through culture, language, and religion. Their identity still remains “Tibetan,” and yes, they are mapping their existence in India, even as a minority, making a difference and influencing many.

Keywords: Border, Tibet, exile, Buddhism, Cartography

Introduction

Nationality is very crucial; it defines identity and is a complex process of self-recognition. Nationality gives one a collective identity. It helps one get recognition socially, but sadly it is not applicable to all. There are communities living in the shade, as they have been displaced somewhere else and are not in their own country. These people are called refugees. According to the UNHCR, the U.N. Refugee Agency, “A refugee is a person forced to flee their country because of violence, conflict or fear.” This fear may arise from ethnic identity, religious belief, nationality, etc. For instance, there are many refugees around the world, and here we take the

Tibetan refugees of India. India hosts approximately 2.5 lakh refugees and asylum seekers, according to India refugee population statistics. Among them, Tibetan refugees constitute a significant group, with the Ministry of Home Affairs Annual Report (2020–2021) recording their population at 72,312.

In 1951, the Seventeen-Point Agreement ended the independent status of Tibet. A few years later in 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama fled Tibet and along with him, numerous Tibetans followed him into exile in India. Tibet is now suppressed, as it has now become an autonomous region in People's Republic of China. Tibet is reconfigured in cartography yet remaining strongly present in memories. India is home for many Tibetans, and this has resulted in the creation of Tibetan diaspora. They are settled in settlements such as Dharamshala, Bylakuppe, Odisha, Darjeeling, and many other parts of India. Although Tibet continues to fade from political cartographies, religious institutions like Namdroling in India has become living maps for Tibetans in exile. In this paper, we focus on the Namdroling Monastery, Bylakuppe, Mysore, established by His Holiness Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche in 1963. Despite it being a spiritual and cultural centre, there is limited scholarly attention on Namdroling as a site where Tibetan identity, religion, and heritage are preserved and reshaped in India. This research seeks to address this gap by studying Namdroling as a cartography of “forgotten Tibet” and its role in sustaining India-Tibet relations.

A Brief Historical Background

The Dalai Lama, along with thousands of Tibetan people came into exile. His Holiness first went to Missourie and then later transferred to Dharamshala. Along with the Dalai Lama, several other Rinpoches also fled to India. As this paper focuses on Namdroling Monastery which is based in Bylakuppe, in the Indian state of Karnataka. It is one of the oldest and the second-largest settlement in India, His Holiness Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche is of great importance. He initiated and established the monastery, which now houses monks from across the world. Pema Norbu Rinpoche is the 3rd Drubwang, the 11th throne holder of the Palyul lineage. In the opening chapter, “An Introduction to the Palyul Tradition,” in the book *A Garland of Immortal Wishes of Wish Fulfilling Tree*, he regards Tibet as a “snow land.” He explains that there are six mother monasteries that uphold the doctrine of the Nyingmapas, and among them Palyul is one. The Palyul monastery was formed by Kunzang Sherub in 1665 in Kham, Tibet.

The 3rd Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche founded the Namdroling Monastery under the Palyul lineage. He laid the foundation stone on 31 July, 1963. It was His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama who consecrated and bestowed the name “Namdroling.” The official website of Namdroling states that “His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited the monastery to

consecrate it and bestowed the name Namdroling. Likewise, His Holiness Chatrel Rinpoche named the monastery Thegchog, while Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche named it Shedrub and His Holiness himself added Dargyeling. Thus, the complete name of the monastery came to be known as Thegchog Namdrol Shedrub Dargyeling (Land of Increasing Practice and Teaching of the Utmost Yana that achieves spontaneous Liberation).”

The monastery is situated in Bylakuppe, Mysore, Karnataka. One of the studies by Pullman shows that Lugsum Samdupling Tibetan settlement in Bylakuppe, is one of the earliest settlements, established in 1960. The Namdroling Monastery was later established in 1963. When H.H. 3rd Drubwang Penor Rinpoche arrived here, many Tibetans accompanied him. Hence, building on this idea, we can say that a Tibetan community developed around Namdroling, Bylakuppe. Giving them a new home, a new map to trace back, and a way to transmit their culture.

Problem Statement

Many scholars have worked on exiled Tibetans. Their displacement and way of living have been a subject of numerous studies since 1959. However, there is rarely any writing or research done on Namdroling Monastery as a site for preservation of religion, culture, and tradition in exile. This gap has been identified, and this paper seeks to situate Namdroling within a framework of cartography of the

“forgotten Tibet” and its role in maintaining Indo-Tibetan friendship.

Research Questions

This paper’s crux is brought out through the research questions. These questions are framed as outlined below:

1. How does Namdroling Monastery preserve Tibetan religion and culture?
2. How does His Holiness Penor Rinpoche aid in the development of Bylakuppe?
3. How has Namdroling Monastery helped in bonding relationships with Himalayan Buddhism?

Significance of the Study

This study highlights that Namdroling Monastery has preserved Tibetan identity even though it has been displaced from its native site in Tibet. Surviving outside its geographical homeland and currently in exile. It also sheds light on the broader discourse of diaspora and cultural cartographies. It shows the established relationship between Tibet and India. Tibet being a Buddhist country where the king is the religious head, it would not be wrong to say that the monasteries try to continue this legacy by following Tibetan culture, art, and religion. Forty laymen were taken by H.H. 3rd Drubwang

Pema Norbu Rinpoche, who were basically not monks back in Tibet, to become monks. They started reading and learning under the guidance of the Rinpoche. If they were not studying, they would help Rinpoche with clearing the forest or would be performing some other tasks.

The monastery was built in a distinctive Tibetan architecture. It is to be noted that not only Namdroling but all monasteries follow Tibetan art and culture. The thangkas, murals, and every minute detail were brought from Tibet. The material of the dress may have changed from woolen to cotton, but they have retained their dress as they used to wear back in Tibet, although alterations were made to suit the climactic condition in southern India. Food pattern is also very vital. Even after 69 years of exile, they prefer more of their own delicacies than Indian ones. For instance, Khenpo Zochen, from Namdroling, who has established the Palyul Meditation Centre in Mirik, Darjeeling, even today prefers tsampa made of barley and wheat for his breakfast and dinner, which shows the impact of the food culture of Namdroling.

The *dhabas*, meaning monk disciples, are present from every corner of India, especially the northern and northeastern parts of the country. Pema Norbu Rinpoche developed the surroundings of Namdroling and was able to establish good relations with the locals. It was he who constructed the famous Tashi Sambha (bridge), connecting the locals and the settlers.

He himself used to go to buy vegetables for the monks, and he understood the hardships of the farmers. So, he neither selected nor threw away the rotten vegetables; rather, he used to buy the whole sack of vegetables and take it with him.

Now, the monastery also has become a tourist spot, generating commercial activity in this region of Karnataka. Ghela Sonam Gamcho, who is one of the primary sources of the paper, recalls that he joined the Namdroling Monastery in 1979 at the age of five, when one Lamala from Mysore had reached Arunachal Pradesh in search of disciples to join the monastery. Then, there were disciples from different regions of India and Bhutan. Rinpoche himself, in 1980–81, came to Darjeeling, and many disciples from this region were taken to Namdroling. This indicates that the monastery was a hub for learning where the disciples were welcomed warmly, thereby developing Indo-Tibet relations.

Objectives

4. To seek the history and importance of Namdroling Monastery in India in preserving Tibetan culture and religion.
5. To analyze the Indo-Tibetan relationship.
6. To explore Namdroling as the extended cartography of forgotten Tibet.

Literature Review

The loss of the nation has been identified by many researchers. Tenzin Tsundue has written a realistic, confessional poem entitled “Refugee,” where he articulates the condition of refugees in exile as both a physical and emotional displacement. As a Tibetan refugee, he is universally representing refugees and their psychology through the poem. He starts with the description of being “homeless,” which connotes both home as a nation as well as a shelter. He also feels that the letter “R” is etched on his forehead for as long as he lives. The last lines are a confession that he can speak three languages, Tibetan, English, and Hindi, but between his English and Hindi, the Tibetan tongue always reads “RANGZEN,” meaning freedom and independence. The absence of home marks the reality lived by the displaced. This poem allows readers to read through the transition of the dispersed as in two states, having a home and being homeless. He writes about the loss of home, which is in fact the central theme, where being displaced is not merely physical but is a deep emotional state.

The last lines are crucial in his poem. His ability to speak Hindi means that he has assimilated into the Indian language while maintaining his individual identity as a Tibetan. In the first case, the theory of the melting bowl can be applied, whereas in the second, the theory of the salad bowl can be applied. The theory “Starting in the 1960s, a new vision

of American pluralism arose, metaphorically similar to the salad bowl” (Thornton, 2012, 143). Compared to the melting pot, the salad bowl theory maintains the unique identities of individuals that would otherwise be lost to assimilation. The immediate advantage of the salad bowl theory is that it acknowledges the discrete identities and cultural differences of a multicultural society. This appreciation for the individual contributions of each ethnic group to society transcends the overarching ascendancy of the dominant culture at the expense of imperceptible minority groups (Berray, 143).

Although Tibetans have been displaced in India, they have been successful in maintaining their distinctive Tibetan culture. Franz Michael, in *Survival of Culture: Tibetan Refugees in India*, writes about the national polity of the exiled in a neighbouring friendly country. Settling in India has shown their resilience and adaptability. It has also shown how His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been able to transmit, maintain, and continue his legacy, tradition, religion, and custom.

“That is the extraordinary and unique story of the Tibetans in India, a story that demonstrates the vitality of the Tibetan culture and of the people—the one hundred thousand who fled with their leader, the Dalai Lama, from Tibet across the Himalayas to the safety of a land with its own great religious tradition, a land originally the major source of Tibetan Buddhism. India, the land of Gandhi and the land where

the Buddha once lived, was the best sanctuary Tibetan polity could have found. Clearly, the survival of Tibetan culture in the Indian diaspora is one of the wondrous and hopeful events of our time” (Michael 1985, page number needed).

This is how Tsundue’s loss has been partially repaired by settling in India. This has given them a new cartography without losing their individual identity. However, researchers till now have not been able to map the monasteries of India of Tibet’s root for preserving Tibetan culture and heritage.

Religion is a significant component of Tibetan culture. Monasteries are the centre for preservation and also institution for higher learning. Reading L. T. Omprakash, it is clear that they have preserved their individuality through religion and culture. Tibet has a rich history of Buddhism; rather, we can say that it is the root of Tibetan Buddhism.

Within these settlements, Tibetans have maintained their religion, and “None of them in the camp have got converted to any other religion during their exile here. Their knowledge about other religions is also limited. The entire life of the Tibetans in general and the Tibetan refugees in particular revolves around their religion. In fact, the current crises and their sustained struggle are also not only because of the patriotic feelings they have, but also because of the strong religious beliefs and sentiments that they have cherished forever” (Omprakash 2011). Namdroling is a sanctuary for collective

consciousness, continuity, and tradition. The construction of monasteries gave the exiled a space to perform their religion as they did in their home back in Tibet. The monastery was renovated in 1999 and is a replica of the Palyul monastery in Kham. The prayers that the Nyingmapas follow till today were brought from Tibet; although many scriptures were burnt, they were able to compile and preserve them again through the monasteries. For instance, the Mahakala rituals that the monks practiced were recited by H.H. Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche and are performed till today. The question of how a monastery can preserve culture may arise here. Well, the writer Robyn Borento has made clear in his writing “Buxa Chogar: Saving Tibetan in Exile.” He also makes clear, on the saying of Lama Sonam Gamcho whom I had interviewed, that the Tibetans were not allowed to move forward from Buxa Duar. It was in this particular place that a camp was made, and all four lineages of Tibet monasteries, Rinpoche, and monks stayed together for a certain period until they were sent to Dharamshala, Karnataka, or to other places within India. It was from here that they continued their dharma and thought to go with the flow of spreading Tibetan Buddhism and culture. “In the evenings, the colleges debated together and the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya monks were welcome to join, which they often did” (Borento 30).

The culture of debate still exists in the monasteries, which was actually practiced in Tibet. The monks did not stop even

when they were living in very close space at Buxa Duar. This is performed in Namdroling till today. It is an art, a form of discussion to get a clearer picture of religion and philosophy. He also throws light on how the rituals were performed and on the making of bamboo altars. Lama Gamcho too says that even when the monks had no money, they made a statue of Sangay, Lord Buddha, with mud. Apart from religion, the monastery has been celebrating Losar and Tshechu, keeping Tibetan festival and tradition alive (Pullman 1983; Schaik 2011).

Methodology

The qualitative method is applied to write this paper. Surveys through the monks from Namdroling Monastery were conducted. Lamala Sonam Gamcho and Reverend Khenpo Zochen are our primary sources, as they were also extensively interviewed. Another Lamala, Lama Sonam, a Lopen from Namdroling and currently living in Delhi, Majnu ka Tilla, quotes, “The moment you enter the monastery you will feel Tibet.” The questionnaire was prepared diligently and sent to the monks of Namdroling or to the monks who are currently living outside the monastery to fulfill their duties. It was also circulated to a few Tibetans living in Bylakuppe and in other parts of India.

Thematic Analysis

If nationalism develops along the registers of imagined identities and identification, as Anderson suggests, the context of Tibetan diasporic settlements in India reveals it to be a more poignant and fecund construct. This is so because, in the geopolitical backdrop, the reconstructions of Tibetan imagination serve as critical rejoinders to the stolid fabrications of national identity and geopolitical proprietorship. Perhaps the theological differences between China and Tibetan identity vis-à-vis the Confucian and Mahayana characteristics are in sync with the differences in political considerations. The fluidity of all dependent identities, including nationalist conception, finds manifestation in the constant constructions and reconstructions of the imagined home outside the space of its cartographic reality, so much so that Dharamshala is akin to a contingent spatiality outside the discourse of national spaces—a heterotopic framework par excellence. Although the nation Tibet exists, Tibetans are able to create their similitude of Tibet here in India, as seen in Dharamshala and Bylakuppe. Tibet is now seen as forgotten, but the cartography is found here. Namdroling Monastery and the settlement around it follow the Tibetan concept of the creation of society. “Tibetan refugee settlements in India had been deliberately designed in such a way as to recreate Tibetan society with its core value intact. Such a recreation of pockets of Tibetan culture and society in India was not only the popular desire

and determination of refugees from Tibet but was to a large extent endorsed and even encouraged by the Government of India as a matter of policy.” In the same paper, he writes again, “We also have noticed the glimpses of religious and cultural autonomy given to the refugee population in the settlement. Most of the refugee respondents also hailed the Indian government’s policy of not interfering with their religious and cultural life. They admit that they have been enjoying complete freedom in this regard” (Omprakash 2011). However, it is a long story to narrate the rehabilitation and the hardship that His Holiness endured, and the establishment of the CTA was like a cherry on the cake.

The old building of the monastery was built in 1963, but it was replaced by a new one, which is a replica of Palyul Monastery, in 2009. Construction started in 2005. It was constructed according to Tibetan tradition. We can see the statue of Sakyamuni Buddha and Guru Padmasambhava, which is filled with holy scriptures, relics, valuable items, and so on. “Delineations on the wall behind the three statues are the goddesses of offering. The paintings on the sides of the third floor show the life story of Lord Buddha and twelve great teachers of Dzogchen. Paintings on the walls of the second floor represent the eleven throne holders of the Palyul tradition and the great scholars and masters of the Nyingma tradition (two major traditions of Buddhism in Tibet). Near the Golden Temple, one can see a replica of Palyul Monastery

in Tibet, now occupied by China. This replica was built in 2009 by His Holiness Penor Rinpoche to replace a previous one built by him in 1980. H.H. Penor Rinpoche is the 11th throne holder of Palyul Monastery and also the founder of Namdroling Monastery” (Omprakash 2011). It can be noted here that it is not wrong to label Namdroling and Bylakuppe as “Little” or “Mini Tibet.” Tracing the “true” Palyul or its origins is insignificant, for the nature of reality lies in its ability to be constructed in manifold ways. Infinite constructions, as in the distinctive Mahayana tradition of infinite lineages and reincarnations, suggest the ultimate nature of reality beyond the binary frameworks of existing/annihilating or living/dead. The “government-in-exile” in Dharamshala further foregrounds the political logic in this unique politico-religio-spatial bind, as it is neither a government recognized in concrete identitarian terms nor is it rooted in a sovereign space as conceived in modern political thought. At most, it mimics the categorization of political identity itself as played out in the hegemonic cartographic exercises of nation-states. However, for the Tibetan tradition, this is not a deliberate strategic intervention requiring efforts to showcase itself as resistance. It is just a performative display of the theological bedrock of Tibetan identity, wherein the “dream-like” nature of reality carries itself onto political tenets and configurations. Perhaps this also gives us ground to understand Chinese efforts to co-opt the Buddhist faith itself. Exploring the

history of the monastery and its inner arrangements help one map the performative dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism that serve as silent and hitherto less recognized sites of political resistance.

Limitations

Namdroling, although constructed in 1963, has been overshadowed not in religion but in the field of research. Rinpoche's hard work and his suffering are not known by many. He has opened a nunnery, and it was in the past year that the women Khenpo, called Khenmo, were conferred. The rich history of Namdroling is yet to be researched and written, and this is challenging for budding researchers as no references are available except a few on Bylakuppe in English. They have to rely mostly on the narratives of older monks who have studied or are staying in Namdroling or Bylakuppe.

Conclusion

Namdroling is obviously one of many living representations of Tibet, embodying its architecture, art, tradition, and religion. The displaced have traced a new, refined boundary of Tibet here. Popular as "the Golden Temple of the South," the monastery attracts visitors from near and far. While tourists are drawn to its rich Tibetan art and architecture, only a handful of researchers and bloggers have written about it so far. Comprehensive research and documentation are still lacking.

Namdroling deserves preservation and conservation, as it represents not only cultural continuity but also a cartography of Rangzen (freedom).

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Mother–Daughter as Root and Branch: A Study of Female Genealogy in *A Home in Tibet*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the intertwined bonds between mother, daughter, and home in Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's memoir, *A Home in Tibet* (2013). A deeply personal memoir written after the demise of her mother, it offers a nuanced understanding of exile in both political and intimate terms. The author undertakes a journey to Tibet while offering personal anecdotes, family histories, and ethnographic accounts of contemporary Tibet. At the heart of the memoir is a quest to locate home geographically, affectively, and politically. A Tibetan's journey in Tibet may run the risk of sounding like a travelogue that is hardly considered political. However, this is a journey of an exiled daughter whose only access to her homeland was her mother and the stories she narrated. The text is structured around a triangular relationship, where the figure of the mother operates as a cultural archive, the daughter as an inheritor of exile, and the idea of home as a shifting, unstable locus of belonging. This memoir is markedly distinct in style as it operates in a dyad, the past and future of Tibet being represented by mother and daughter. The

oral history passed down by the mother and the daughter's written word function as a historical document for posterity. Her experience in Tibet provides an address to the otherwise ephemeral home. The stories inherited from the mother are slowly juxtaposed with the contemporary images of Tibet in real time and space. The mother thus becomes the central transmitter of cultural knowledge and longing. The act of writing a memoir therefore becomes an intervention for Tibetan cultural and political survival. By drawing on Tsering Shakya's reflections on exile, this paper argues that Dhompa's memoir is an attempt at drawing a delicate female genealogy while experimenting with the semantics of home.

Keywords: Tibet, Literature, Gender, female genealogy, home, exile.

Ab kab jayeib deswa O rama?
Jiyaran tarasiye...
Jab jab baheli poorab se baiyarien
Rahiya ke aamwa pe gaayi re koylaen
Bhaiya ke bhael hai sun hi hai lallanwa
Angna mai gawat hui amma soharwa
Ab kab jayeib deswa O rama?
Jiyaran tarasiye

When can I go to my country, O God?
My heart longs, the longing is increasing.
Whenever the wind blows from the east,
and the bird sings on the mango tree,
I have heard that my brother had a baby boy.
They must be singing sohar songs for him in the courtyard.
When can I go to my country, O God?
My heart longs, the longing is increasing.
(from “Deswa”, an Awadhi folksong)

An Awadhi folk song about migration and longing, popular in the northern Hindi belt of India called “Deswa,” evocatively sung by Malini Awasthi, describes the longing for home or the desh. The song narrates the yearning to return home. The married woman says it has been long since she left her own house after marriage; she has heard that her brother had a son, and the newborn must be playing in the same courtyard where she used to play. People must be singing sohar songs for him. She wishes to be there and relish the moment. Towards the middle of the song, she asks when the invitation will come from the same courtyard in which she played with her brother as a child. Her maternal home is her country. She is asking for permission to return home, to go back to her own house. Whom is she asking? Her father, being very strict, has not yet called for her. The possibility of going unannounced is not an

option. Thus, she is waiting for an “invitation” to return home. The refrain repeats the ache of waiting, almost like a prayer.

In the folk song, the woman is asking the patriarchal head for permission to access what her own house was once. Whereas in *A Home in Tibet* (2013), Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is asking the same question, but to the colonizer. How and when can I come home? Why is my visa getting denied? A pattern emerges where women are seeking permission to access spaces that are rightfully theirs. In the light of the two contexts given above, this paper examines the many sites of home. The paper asks: where is a home for a woman? Where is home for an exiled woman? Where is home for displaced people in the world? When can women return to their own homes? What are their reasons, and what must they be to be qualified for a legitimate return?

A few mythological references help us understand that this return is anything but possible. In the Ramayana, Sita returns to her “mother” as the earth opens to receive her back into its embrace, ending her suffering. This act of cosmic return is a final reclamation of her dignity by going where she belongs, that is, with her mother. In the Mahabharata, Draupadi does not return dramatically; however, she is the first to fall and thus takes an exit from the material world and ascends to heaven during the great departure or Mahaprasthanika. In the film *Shambhala* (2024), Pema returns to her own spiritual destination, away from the patriarchal noise of accusations. *Shambhala* is depicted as a

quiet world, where she is seen wearing a self-knit yellow sweater, demarcating her own kingdom. In mythology, women return to the supernatural; on the other hand, Tsering Wangmo returns to Tibet in real time and place, in absence of the supernatural. Consequently, this return, however transitory, is of immense value in a geopolitical sense, as the author says, “for me it is the dead who bring me here. It is they who give me a place in Tibet” (Dhompa 2013, 15).

Professor Honey Oberoi Vahali, in *Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees* (2021), offers a viscosity to the current state of Tibet; she says, “Tibet – presently the largest geographical colony on this earth – symbolises a festured wound on the body of the world’s conscience” (Vahali 2021, 18). However, if one were to open the world map today and look for Tibet, it would perhaps be a moot point. One cannot look up Tibet geographically on our Oxford Atlas anymore. Yet it is common knowledge that Tibet exists somewhere.

This memoir, like any other memoir, is deeply moving because it not only takes the reader to Tibet but is constantly asking us to re-look at what a home is. It is asking us to ponder upon the many versions of home we may inhabit. How is home looked at? Should we ask where our home is? Who is our home? When do we feel at home? This oscillation from an object to a person and to a feeling is perhaps what the author has successfully rendered in her memoir (*A Home in Tibet*,

2013). She recalls her mother saying, “All of her exiled life she waited to return home. She spoke of exile as something that would be expunged over time. When this is over, we can go home” (Dhompa 2013, 1).

The memoir opens in Tibet, with the chapter titled “abode of snow” (Dhompa 2013, 5). The title at the outset clarifies that there is “a” home “in” Tibet, while in the prologue it states “this is not a simple story” (Dhompa 2013, 1). As one reads further, it is revealed that the author’s mother had died in a fatal car accident in 1994. Thereafter, the author takes this journey to Tibet with the intention of releasing her mother’s ashes there. Echoing this in her memoir, Dhompa says, “Existing without proof of photographs or contact, this Tibet was our real home” (Dhompa 2013, 3). The first visual experience of being in Tibet is when she says:

The moment I acknowledge time and space, the green becomes a burden and a longing takes over me to turn away to see something else. Perhaps this desire comes with the comprehension that there is nothing I can do to get closer or away from the land. It takes my entire body to see this land, and still, there is more. (Dhompa 2013, 20)

The memoir is a visual narrative of Tibet, “full of wild flowers, purple, yellow and white,” while it is also a sociological document of Tibet in real time. The visuality that seeps into

this narrative is of Tibet with flowers, yaks, while tracing a female genealogy. She is, in a way, creating a new lexicon: phayul, the fatherland, is nothing but a land of blooming flowers while being in her mother's lost homeland. Much like her childhood, when she was asked about her father's whereabouts, she would say that her Amala was both her father and mother. While revisiting Tibet, she feels the same.

The dangers of looking at a nation with a gendered lens are many; we in India are aware of the pitfalls of "mothering" a nation. The call for "Bharat-Mata" in India is when juxtaposed with the status of women offers a new register to unveil contemporary Indian nationalism. At the same time, there is a risk that framing the mother as home may tend to romanticize the maternal and the homeland. This makes exile appear compensatory rather than ruptured. This memoir, however, resists that simplification, as we are made aware of the Chinese question time and again through many episodes. In the preface of *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance across Tibetan Exile* (2025), Dhompa reflects on how she was once introduced by someone as a daughter of a dissenter: "Her mother was anti-government" (Dhompa 2025, vii). She was twenty-three and had lost her only family. The associations with the mother are not depicted in a hagiographical light but are rooted in a real sense of belonging.

Many sites of home in A Home in Tibet

Alice Walker, in her influential collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), looks at her mother's garden to collect evidence for her creativity. Walker recalls:

And I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colours, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art. (Walker 1983, 336)

The garden is both literal and symbolic as it represents creativity, care, and survival under harsh conditions. This garden is passed on by mothers to their daughters as proof of tangible existence and as a potential for change, rocky soil turned into a garden of flowers.

In the same vein, Dhompa has inherited her mother's Tibet as a land of flowers, as her mother would often reminisce about the beauty of flowers in Tibet during summer, “where they looked more beautiful, taller, fragrant and vivid” (Dhompa 2013, 2). Dhompa also highlights that the variety those flowers

brought to her changed over time, as she would compare the riotous garden to the mundane daily objects around. She says:

She would tell me of the knee-deep fields of purple, red, and white—plants never named or pointed out to us during our years in India and Nepal—that over time served to create an idea of her fatherland, phayul, as a riotous garden. I pictured her wilderness paradise of flowers by comparing them not to the marigolds, daisies, and bluebells I crushed with my fingers, but to the shapes of household artifacts around me: lollipop, broom, bottle. Disparate objects that surrendered to and influenced the idea, space, and hope of a more abundant and happy place (Dhompa 2013, 2).

This lack of imagination that the writer faced early on as a child is filled in by her final attempt to *bid adieu* to her mother's remnants as she visits Tibet. The cycle of "our mothers' gardens" being tended by the daughters is continued through her journey, where she lands in Tibet and is a quiet observer of the changes the land has undergone. Her ethnographic accounts of the place show that the lost homeland is changing in real time and that her inherited memories may have been rather stagnant.

Dhompa's first material home was a two-room house in Dharamshala in which one room served as the kitchen and the other was their "everything room" (Dhompa 2013,10).

However, her first affective home is that of phayul as a land of flowers, which she inherited from her mother. It is not just the flowers that Tibet stood for; Dhompa also inherits the labour and loss of many women who one fine day were “homeless.” Therefore, the gardens of our mothers, at face value, can stand for the aesthetics they define; however, it is the larger “artistic” legacy that is being passed on. Mothers therefore become carriers of cultural memory in displacement and oppression. As a daughter, the act of writing a memoir is the creation of the garden. In the Tibetan exiled context, it is imperative to recognize the precarity of everyday existence in the absence of citizenship and belonging.

Ranajit Guha, in his timeless and incisive essay, “*The Small Voice of History*,” asks what history would look like if women’s voices were regarded as integral in the making of history. A possibility of this historiography demands re-writing, where attention must be drawn to “the small voice” (Guha 2009, 315). Dhompa’s text brings to the fore agency and instrumentality in the narrative, as it is not her voice alone that we hear; it is an amalgamation of many other small voices. While she is in Tingsikha, she narrates how her mother’s childhood playmate, Yungyang, is surprised to see a banana and she asks, “Did the Chinese make this?” (Dhompa 2013, 91). Tsering Shakya points this out in his pioneering article, “The Waterfall and the Fragrant Flowers,” and elucidates how the Chinese colonised the land and the minds of the people simultaneously (Shakya 2000).

A little insight into Yungyang's life informs the reader about the marginalised inside Tibet. Her name means "a bounty of turnip," which is a giveaway for her class, as turnip grows without much effort and is consumed by poor people. Dhompa admits that she is the poorest in the rung and that nothing has changed for her; she adds, "Yungyang has always been poor and under my grandfather she was given no chance to alter or improve her life. She would have continued to serve the family without any remuneration until the end of her days. She has not benefited under the Chinese rule either" (Dhompa 2013, 101). This is not the flowery Tibet that was passed down; yet the daughter can find out about the past through "postmemory" (Hirsch).

Some women boiled the leather of their shoes so that there was some taste to the water they drank for dinner. Mothers were told to kill sons, sons were made to spit on lamas, daughters had to dance on the bodies of their fathers, nuns were forced to have sex with monks, and men and women were coerced to trample on sacred statues. The limbs of deities lay in the dust like the severed limbs of babies. Tenzin can still picture hundreds of texts written in gold fluttering in the air like a band of butterflies. His eyes have seen what his mind could never have imagined, and he cannot recall in simple sentences the small and big injustices he has lived through. (Dhompa 2013, 200).

Another striking parallel is when Dhompa admits that there was a desire in her to verify the experiences narrated by her folk in Tibet. Guha's "small voice" serves as a reminder, and she admits,

Months after these exchanges with Tenzin, Dorje, and other nomads of Dhompa, when I am no longer in Tibet, I search in libraries and on the Internet for research articles illuminating the period mentioned by Tenzin and Dorje. I am verifying their stories in papers written by people who are scholars, but who are not Tibetan and who did not live through the Cultural Revolution in Tibet. The irony is painful. And this, when they have not revealed the worst they have seen and been through, and when they have accepted my stories without judgment. If Tenzin and Dorje were scholars, would I have doubted their memory, and the chronological veracity of their stories? (Dhompa 2013, 202).

The concept of "home" might appear self-evident, like a physical place, a set of coordinates on the map, or the national territory from which one has been displaced. Yet exile unsettles such geographic fixity. For displaced Tibetans, as for many diasporic subjects, home cannot be secured through literal return. In Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's memoir, home is not simply an unreachable land but something carried in stories, practices, and maternal orientations. It is deeply gendered and

affective, bound up with memory, longing, and care. Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire" is an apt reference to the memoir, not as ornament, but as a set of tools for naming what otherwise might remain hidden: that the mother's acts of remembering, caring, and narrating are not only private gestures but political practices of survival. Feminist and affect theories, particularly those of Avtar Brah, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sara Ahmed, illuminate how maternal care in exile constitutes both cultural transmission and political labour.

Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) offers a crucial distinction between the "desire for homeland" and "homing desire." The former indexes nationalist, territorialist projects: the longing for the sovereign return to a land lost. The latter, by contrast, speaks to the intimate, affective need for belonging, one that can be fulfilled in places other than the original homeland. Homing desire, Brah argues, does not necessarily depend on the possibility of return; it is about orientation, attachment, and affective grounding. Dhompa's memoir stages precisely this distinction. Her mother, a Tibetan exile who never returns to Tibet, embodies homing desire: Tibet exists in her stories, in her rituals of everyday care, and in the affective environment she creates for her daughter. The home she builds in exile is fragile yet real; it provides belonging without territorial sovereignty. In this sense, the maternal home is not the nation but the space of homing desire, one that carries Tibet forward through affective inheritance.

For Dhompa, the maternal archive is the stories of village life, songs, and an insistence on speaking Tibetan, all of which function as the terrain on which Tibet is lived, even in absence. The memoir thus asks: what does it mean to inherit Tibet not through the physical homeland but through the orientation of a mother's care? By reading Dhompa alongside Brah, one can see that homing desire is not a retreat from the political but a redefinition of it. It foregrounds how belonging is created in exile through affective, often gendered practices. Yet Dhompa also complicates Brah's formulation: maternal homing desire is never complete, always shadowed by its partiality and the fragility of memory, as can be noted in her poetry collection *Rules of the House and Other Poems* (2025). In the poem titled "Exile: an invitation to a struggle," Dhompa evokes a metaphor for well-being, saying:

Mother tells me to eat well.

Mother, who knows best, asks,

how are you? She has asked this

all of my life. There are only two

answers to this question. Two answers

keep us mother and child. (Dhompa 2025, 68)

Patricia Hill Collins' formulation of "motherwork," introduced in *Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about*

Motherhood” (1994), extends this reading by theorizing maternal labor as political. For Collins, motherwork is not confined to child-rearing in the domestic sphere; rather, it encompasses the survival of families and communities under conditions of structural oppression. To mother is to secure cultural continuity and the possibility of a collective future, even when the dominant society undermines such survival.

Seen through Collins’ lens, Dhompa’s mother’s care work in exile, that is, her storytelling, ritual practices, and insistence on the Tibetan language, constitutes a form of motherwork. These acts are not reducible to private maternal affection; they are strategies for sustaining Tibetan identity against the erasures of displacement. The domestic space, then, becomes political terrain: the kitchen table where Tibetan is spoken, or the bedtime story that reanimates a homeland, functions as a site of cultural resistance. In her essay, Dhompa writes,

The elders called me the daughter of Tsering Choden Dhompastang. Because of her, I was also a person with a past that preceded my birth. I was a member of the nation of two. This past gave me a sense of belonging in a present where I could not even obtain a document affirming my refugee status (“Nation of Two” in Dhompa 2013, 14).

Collins’ framework allows us to see how *A Home in Tibet* frames maternal memory as both intimate and political labour. The mother’s practices are not only about raising a daughter

but about reproducing Tibet itself as a living inheritance. At the same time, Dhompa's memoir shows how "motherwork" in exile takes on new modalities. When the mother dies, the daughter assumes the role of cultural transmitter; her writing itself becomes an extension of motherwork. Thus, the text stages not only the persistence of maternal labour but also its transference across generations and genres.

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) provides yet another dimension to this analysis by theorizing emotions as orientation devices. Emotions, Ahmed argues, direct us toward and away from objects, collectives, and futures. Longing, in particular, is not merely backward-looking nostalgia but a way of organizing orientation of pointing subjects toward possible worlds.

In *A Home in Tibet*, longing circulates as a central affect: the mother longs for the Tibet she left behind, and the daughter longs for a Tibet she never knew. Yet this longing is not simply melancholic attachment to loss. It becomes a forward-facing orientation, one that aligns the daughter toward Tibet through her mother's stories and practices. Longing is thus productive; it shapes the daughter's sense of self, her literary vocation, and her orientation toward the collective history of Tibetans in exile. Belonging to mother and, by that virtue, belonging to Tibet. However, belonging to Tibet also creates a sense of confusion. This discomfort is replaced by a strong sense

of rootedness when Dhompa draws her connection to her mother. In the preface of *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance across Tibetan Exile* (2025), she recalls:

Belonging is a conundrum, even to Tibetans of my generation, born as refugees in India and Nepal. We are not the Tibetans who had to flee from homes tucked deep within the folds of mountains and walk over the Himalayas to keep alive. We are not the ones who through our labour helped build a nation in exile under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We are not the ones whose life choices were shaped by estrangement (Dhompa 2025, 10).

Ahmed's framework clarifies how affect moves between bodies, linking the mother's orientation to the daughter's. The mother's longing does not end with her but becomes the affective condition through which the daughter inherits Tibet. At the same time, Dhompa complicates Ahmed's optimism about the generativity of longing. In her memoir, longing is always shadowed by loss, impossibility, and fragility. Here, Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" (2011) becomes useful: the very attachment that sustains the daughter also wounds her, because the home she longs for remains structurally unattainable. In her essay, she admits,

Exile was the only form of belonging I knew. While I could not and did not know how I fit into the world outside the

Tibetan exile community, I had a clear sense of what was possible at home. Everything we owned was within view. (“Nation of Two” in Dhompa 2013, 10)

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives make visible the political dimensions of maternal care in exile. Brah’s distinction between desire for homeland and homing desire clarifies that belonging in exile need not depend on territorial sovereignty, but *A Home in Tibet* shows that maternal homing desire is always fragile, precarious, and partial. Collins’ motherwork resonates strongly, but in exile the work of mothering extends beyond the life of the mother, continuing through the daughter’s writing. Ahmed’s theorization of longing as orientation explains how affect directs the daughter toward Tibet, but in Dhompa’s memoir, longing is also inseparable from loss, requiring a critical nuance drawn from Berlant and others.

This framework demonstrates that “home” in exile is not reducible to geography; it is gendered, affective, and labour-intensive. It must be continually recreated through maternal practices of care, storytelling, and emotional orientation. By reading Dhompa through these feminist and affect theorists, this study argues that maternal memory and care constitute political survival strategies, complicating dominant accounts of exile that privilege nationalist return. In this sense, *A Home in Tibet* insists that the politics of

home are inseparable from the politics of gender, affect, and inheritance.

Conclusion

Within the tradition of memoirs written by daughters, poignant renderings include Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death* (1964), Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* (1993), Edwidge Danticat's *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* (2017), and the more recent *Mother Mary Comes to Me* by Arundhati Roy (2025). A common thread that runs through these memoirs is the struggle for an individual identity while accrediting the internal force that drives them. Invariably, the messiness of motherhood is recognized by the daughters. Reiterating Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), where she expands on the difference between motherhood as an institution that seeks to control and mothering as an experience that one chooses as a source of joy, it is often in this middle ground that mothers and daughters meet. The daughters, in their lived experience, accord humanity to mothers by acknowledging how patriarchy perpetuates the myth of the "good enough mother" (Winnicott).

Dhompas's memoir, while doing all of the above, equally attempts to highlight how instrumental mothering can be in the absence of a "country," while building small units of care for sustenance; it holds the potential to recreate a sense of belonging essential in any community. In her essay "A Nation

of 'Two,' Dhompa takes note of this essence of community and care she felt for her mother:

There were no rules in my mother's house, probably because we were always in each other's view. I could say that I was a dutiful daughter and I followed her well. Or that she observed me and arranged our lives to be harmonious. I think it had mostly to do with the fact that we were all we had. We guarded each other's happiness. We put the other first. We didn't have to make any decisions because we had few options. Our love, like our mobility, had a relationship with precarity. Unable to root ourselves wherever we were, we instead were grounded in each other—a nation of two (Dhompa 2013, 11).

Tibet is, politically, a “festered wound,” yet when viewed from the prism of maternal memories, it is a garden of lush blooms. Dhompa's memoir adds veracity to the present historical condition of Tibet. Her memoir is a recorded document that serves as a constant reminder that, in a patriarchal world of fathers and colonizers, a daughter of a single woman in exile can attempt to trace her own geopolitical coordinates. This “small voice” is not just that of a woman, but that of a Tibetan whose history is time and again shredded by the dominant oppressive discourse.

As the paper began by suggesting how the folk song “Deswa” uses the word “country” for “home” interchangeably, it is perhaps only a beginning to rethink what a home and a country mean for the exiled. Perhaps the triangulation of maternal memories of an exiled daughter is best conveyed by the contemporary poet Nayyirah Waheed, who renders this affect delicately: “My mother was my first country, the first place I ever lived” (Waheed 2013).

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An Engagement in Tibetan Media History through Socio-Historical Contextual Analysis of the *Yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long*

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Abstract

This study explores the foundational phase of Tibetan media history by examining the role played by a Tibetan-language newspaper, *Yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long*, or the “Mirror of News from Various Regions of the World,” also referred to as the *Tibet Mirror*. Using Kalimpong, a town in West Bengal, India, from where it was published, as a case study, this paper investigates the enduring social, political, and cultural relations between India and Tibet through a media studies perspective. The *Tibet Mirror* was published from 1925 to 1963 and was one of the most successful Tibetan-language newspapers, existing continuously for 38 years. Engaging in a socio-historical contextual analysis of editorials, opinion columns, essays, and news reports systematically selected from the 1,853-page archives of the *Tibet Mirror*, the researcher traces how the newspaper emerged as a forum for complex discourses. Furthermore, the study explores how Dorjé Tharchin—a Tibetan Christian convert born in Himachal Pradesh in 1890 who migrated to Kalimpong—transformed the newspaper

into an agent of persuasion and solidarity for Tibetans by connecting Tibet to the rest of the world. He eventually championed the cause of Tibetan freedom and unmasked the atrocities committed in Tibet after its occupation by Communist China. The newspaper had as its ardent subscribers the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas and high-ranking officials of the British and Indian governments, pointing to the prominent influence it enjoyed among the highest echelons of Tibetan administration and the international community. The research unravels the many layers of political, cultural, and social relations shared by India and Tibet. The researcher argues that Indians of Tibetan origin, like Gergan Dorjé Tharchin—journalist, editor, publisher, and owner of the first commercial Tibetan printing press, the “Tibet Mirror Press”—played a critical role, and their contributions have crucial implications for the understanding of Tibetan media history. Further, the discourses of the *Tibet Mirror* offer valuable insights into how Tibet was imagined as a nation-state and how Tibetan as a literary language and Tibetan journalism evolved by incorporating typical communicative protocols that continue to endear Tibetan-language newspapers to readers today.

Keywords: Tibetan Media History, Mirror of the News, Gergan Tharchin, Kalimpong, Tibet Mirror.

Introduction

Hampton (2005, 239), citing Schudson (2002) and Curran (2002), points out that “media history has not developed as a major, mainstream scholarly field.” This is primarily because historians and political and social theorists seldom investigate news as an institution (Hampton 2005; Schudson 2002; Curran 2002). The diverse methodologies and focus of studies beyond historiography also make one wonder what “media history actually is.” Further, scholars have seldom focused on broader and historically significant media discourses, being narrowly focused on “present-day concerns” (Hampton 2005).

Briggs and Burke (2002), Chalaby (1998), and Conboy (2002) have made significant contributions in recent times that aim toward what Curran (2002) suggested: a more synthetic approach to media history studies. Curran’s (2002) synthetic approach emphasizes integrating competing narratives and methodologies to create a more comprehensive understanding of media’s development and influence across society. Curran (2002) advocates combining historical, sociological, and political analyses to avoid simplistic or fragmented accounts and, instead, weave together diverse theories and data for a nuanced media history. Media history is composed of rival narratives, including liberal, radical/critical, feminist, libertarian, and cultural populist interpretations, each offering distinct insights into the role and influence of media (Curran 2002). Rather

than privileging one perspective, these approaches must be synthesized into a more holistic and dynamic account, actively linking the histories of different media forms and situating them in broader societal contexts.

The synthetic approach highlights the importance of placing media developments within social, economic, and political trends, showing how changes in media ownership, new communication technologies, and the rise of global media have shaped society. Thus, understanding media history requires simultaneously considering power structures, audience autonomy, and market forces. Such scholarly engagements challenge fragmented or narrow accounts by encouraging scholars to see connections across theories and historical periods. Thus, mass communication is demonstrated to be central in shaping modern society, reflecting and influencing social transformation and democracy.

This research attempts to develop a synthetic approach to analyze how Tibetan identity was mediatized by one of the most historically significant Tibetan newspapers published in India, *Yul phyogs so so'i gsar gyur me long*, or the “Mirror of News from Various Regions of the World.” Zierold (2012, 349), quoting Thomas and Krotz (2008), states:

Mediatization should be defined as a historical, ongoing, long-term process in which more and more media emerge and are institutionalized. Mediatization describes the

process whereby communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole (Krotz 2009, 24).

This research analyzes mediatization in Tibetan media history to understand how Tibetan mass media historically impacted the everyday life of Tibetans, first as a diasporic community in India and then, after 1959, as non-state actors in India. Thus, this research deems mediatization, as Kortti (2016) puts it, as a historical process. The researcher argues that mediatization should be located in specific historical situations and in the meanings of “history-in-the-making.” It should be seen as a process realized within the meta-processes of commercialization, globalization, and individualization, and as a meta-process in itself, to ascertain how it creates worldviews based on the sociocultural factors of media history.

Tibetan diasporic media has a rich and innovative history, with the *Mirror of News from Various Regions of the World* (also known as the *Tibet Mirror*) marking a foundational milestone in Tibetan-language journalism and public discourse (Sawerthal 2011; Roy 2025; Engelhart and Erhard 2015). The Tibetan diaspora, which was enlarged after the 1959 Tibetan uprising, led to the establishment of exile communities, primarily in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Mass media became crucial for maintaining community ties, nation-building, and political

advocacy. In the era of digital transformation, social media platforms like Facebook, WeChat, and QQ have further enabled Tibetans in exile and within Tibet to communicate, exchange information, and cultivate alternative “imagined communities” (Anderson 2008; Roy 2025).

The *Mirror of News from Various Regions of the World*, produced in Kalimpong from 1925 to 1963 by Gergan Dorjé Tharchin, was the earliest and most influential Tibetan-language newspaper (Sawerthal 2011; Roy 2025). Unlike the missionary or political propaganda of earlier efforts, the *Tibet Mirror* aimed to establish a national public sphere and inform Tibetans about world events such as the fall of the Qing dynasty, WWII, and China’s invasion of Tibet. Its content spanned religion, politics, science, and world affairs, positioning itself as both a tool for modernizing Tibetan identity and an archive of shifting global and local realities (Sawerthal 2011; Erhard 2025).

This research unravels the many layers of political, cultural, and social relations shared by India and Tibet. The researcher argues that Indians of Tibetan origin, like Gergan Dorjé Tharchin, who as a journalist, editor, publisher, and owner of the first commercial Tibetan printing press played a critical role, and their contributions have crucial implications for understanding Tibetan media history. Furthermore, the discourses of the *Tibet Mirror* offer valuable insights into

how Tibet as a nation-state was imagined and how Tibetan as a literary language and Tibetan journalism evolved by inculcating styles of typical communicative protocols that endear Tibetan-language newspapers to this day.

The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the *Tibet Mirror* shape early Tibetan public debate? How did Tharchin's editorial stance influence debates on Tibetan nationalism?
2. In what ways did the newspaper blend religious and secular topics to reach readers?
3. Why did Kalimpong's location matter for the newspaper's circulation and authority?
4. How did Tharchin's background shape the paper's political framing?

The Rationale of the Study

Tibetan culture historically vested the written word with the primary purpose of propagating religious and sacred knowledge (Wang-Toutain 2020). Thus, efforts toward developing a secular press within and outside Tibet have been arduous, though they have attracted innovative interventions (Wang-Toutain 2020). *Mirror of News from Various Regions of the World* (*Yul phyogs so so'i gsar gyur me long*) is referred to in this research

as the *Tibet Mirror*, primarily because “*me long*” in Tibetan means “the mirror.” Scholars have also called it the *Tibet Mirror* (Erhard 2015; Roy 2025). Sawerthal (2011), meanwhile, refers to it as *Mélong*. Gergan Dorjé Tharchin, the editor and publisher, used the term “The Tibetan Newspaper” in English within the publication. Due to its generic connotation, that term is not used to identify the newspaper in this research paper.

The *Tibet Mirror* was published from Kalimpong, a small town of immense historical and strategic value in the Eastern Himalayas. Mukhia (2024) argues that after the 1903–1905 Younghusband Mission to Tibet, Kalimpong rose as a strategic location for trade passing through Jeleppla Pass, which connects India to Tibet through Chumbi Valley. Further, given the geopolitical significance of Kalimpong vis-à-vis Tibet, China, Bhutan, Nepal, and India, the town became a conduit not just for commerce and diplomatic negotiations, but also for confrontations, espionage, and political and military standoffs (Roy 2012). The *Tibet Mirror*, published in Kalimpong from 1925 to 1963, witnessed the historical transformation of five countries: China, Tibet, India, Bhutan, and Nepal and, with the partition of India, the rise of Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is therefore a great source of political and social information ranging from the chaos in China after the fall of the Qing dynasty and the rise of the Communists to the struggles led by the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas, the independence of India

and Pakistan, the struggle between the Ranas and the Kings of Nepal, the consolidation of Bhutan as a monarchy, and the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

The researcher argues that given the *Tibet Mirror*'s "place" in history and its strategic location allowing circulation to contemporary power centers in Lhasa, Calcutta, Peking, Kathmandu, and Punakha, the newspaper offers a unique case study of how a publication influenced the popular imagination of Tibet. It connected Tibetans to the outside world in their own language and, through their own cultural tools, tried to make sense of a modern yet alien world.

Literature Review

Sawerthal (2011) has worked intensively on Tibetan newspapers, particularly the *Tibet Mirror*, which she refers to as *Mélong*. While Sawerthal's work is a pioneering scholarly intervention in the historically neglected field of Global South media history and fills important gaps, it cannot be considered a definitive account. Her approach requires substantiation from a media history perspective, particularly regarding how the *Tibet Mirror* is situated in the complex multicultural ethos of the Eastern Himalayas, specifically its relationship with other communities such as the Gorkhas and Sikkimese in the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, and the Adivasis of the Dooars Terai. For instance, *Gorkhey Khabar Kagat*, published and edited by the Christian pastor Padri Ganga

Prasad Pradhan since 1901 as the first Nepali newspaper in the world, has neither attracted a comparative study nor been studied in isolation alongside the *Mirror*. Sawerthal's (2011) research is an important initial contribution.

Erhard (2015) investigates the socio-historical context of the *Tibet Mirror*, highlighting its significance as an early mass media form and its role in transforming Tibetan public discourse. However, Erhard (2015) faced challenges in reconstructing its socio-political impact due to limited archival materials and the geographical spread of readership. Assessing the newspaper's reception is difficult because of the diverse, dispersed Tibetan-speaking communities it targeted. Historical analysis requires a comparative study with a contemporary newspaper from the same region sharing common socio-political issues.

Methodology

This research employs socio-historical contextual analysis focusing on the newspaper's production environment, publishing processes, geopolitical context, and the role of Kalimpong as a strategic town. This implies that, besides detailed content analysis, a case study rooted in media and journalism studies: exploring the newspaper's origins, aims, financing, distribution, and position within Tibetan media history—has been attempted.

A systematic random sampling was used, whereby every 7th edition of the newspaper from Vol. 2, No. 5 (1926) to Vol. 28, No. 8 (November 1, 1963) was considered. This comprised 1,853 pages of archival material accessed from Columbia University. A detailed content analysis was undertaken, specifically analyzing editorials, news reports, advertisements, and announcements to ascertain how the newspaper envisioned Tibet as a nation-state and engaged with themes such as religion, knowledge production, world politics, and economics.

The researcher also employed research tools inspired by classical journalistic questions (who, what, when, where, how, and why) to investigate publication type, name variations, publishing motivations, and historical contexts. It is imperative to ascertain how topics in the *Tibet Mirror* elucidate transformations and how foreign ideas were localized. This interdisciplinary methodology integrates print history, journalism studies, and transcultural perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher combines Anderson's (2020) "imagined communities" concept with a transcultural approach. The transcultural approach helps investigate the blending of global newspaper concepts with Tibetan cultural and communicative protocols. Anderson's (2020) "imagined communities" framework helps analyze how Tibet was imagined as a nation

and how the newspaper genre was adapted for a Tibetan-speaking audience. It examines how the paper helped create a shared sense of community beyond geographical boundaries.

The research situates the *Tibet Mirror* as a medium for an active public in a nascent nation-state and explores its role in secularization outside traditional religious institutions. Institutional secularization theory is explored to highlight the shift of Tibetan print culture away from Buddhist religious authority toward a secular public sphere influenced by colonial and missionary contexts.

Conclusion

The *Yul phyogs so so'i gsar gyur me long* stands as a monumental institution in Tibetan media history, representing the transition from a traditional, monastic-centric information system to a modern, secularized public sphere. Through the socio-historical contextual analysis of its 38-year run, this research has demonstrated that the newspaper was not merely a passive chronicler of events but an active agent in the “imagined community” of the Tibetan nation-state.

Gergan Dorjé Tharchin's unique position as an Indian of Tibetan origin and a Christian convert allowed him to bypass traditional socio-religious gatekeepers, thereby democratizing information for a Tibetan-speaking audience. Furthermore, the strategic geography of Kalimpong provided the necessary

“contact zone” where global modernity and Tibetan tradition could intersect, facilitated by the town’s role as a hub of trade and diplomacy.

The *Tibet Mirror*’s legacy is found in its successful mediatization of Tibetan identity, which fostered solidarity against colonial and communist pressures while simultaneously evolving the Tibetan language into a tool for modern political and scientific discourse. Ultimately, this study asserts that the contributions of pioneers like Tharchin and the specific geopolitical environment of the Eastern Himalayas are central to a comprehensive understanding of how Tibetan journalism and nationalism were forged in the 20th century.

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Securitization and Silence: Tibetan Resistance under India's Geopolitical Constraints

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Tibetan exile life in India has largely concentrated on questions of citizenship, statelessness, and identity. Studies have interrogated the peculiar condition of Tibetans as both “citizens” of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) and “foreign guests” of the Indian state, exploring the everyday implications of non-citizenship, the negotiation of belonging, and the institutional practices of exile governance (McConnell 2009, 343; Hess 2009; Dasgupta 2024; Bloch 2023; Gupta 2024). These works have made significant contributions to our understanding of exile as a site of state-like practices and to broader debates on sovereignty and statelessness. However, less attention has been paid to the implications of India's Tibet policy for the political agency of the exile community. This paper addresses that gap by tracing the patterns of India's approach to Tibetan political activism. It argues that the Indian state's management of the Tibetan presence has produced a distinctive mode of exile governance, where political freedoms are tolerated only conditionally and

curtailed whenever they appear to clash with India's foreign policy priorities.

Introduction

Since the arrival of the Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees in 1959, India has remained the principal site of the Tibetan exile community's political, cultural, and institutional life (McConnell 2009). Yet the scope of Tibetan political activism in India has never been determined solely by the community's own aspirations. Rather, it has been continually held ransom to the vicissitudes of India–China relations. Periods of strained bilateral ties in the 1960s and 1970s allowed for a degree of visible resistance activity, even if under the watchful gaze of the Indian state. Conversely, moments of rapprochement and high-level engagement with Beijing have been accompanied by the contraction of political space available to Tibetan activists. Thus, Tibetan political expression in India is deeply contingent upon India's strategic calculations vis-à-vis China.

Existing scholarship on Tibetan exile life in India has largely concentrated on questions of citizenship, statelessness, and identity. Studies have interrogated the peculiar condition of Tibetans as both “citizens” of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) and “foreign guests” of the Indian state, exploring the everyday implications of non-citizenship, the negotiation of belonging, and the institutional practices of

exile governance (McConnell 2009, 343; Hess 2009; Dasgupta 2024; Bloch 2023; Gupta 2024). These works have made significant contributions to our understanding of exile as a site of state-like practices and to broader debates on sovereignty and statelessness. However, less attention has been paid to the implications of India's Tibet policy for the political agency of the exile community.

This paper addresses that gap by tracing the patterns of India's approach to Tibetan political activism. It argues that the Indian state's management of the Tibetan presence has produced a distinctive mode of exile governance, where political freedoms are tolerated only conditionally and curtailed whenever they appear to clash with India's foreign policy priorities. In doing so, Tibetan activism in India emerges as a case where exile politics is shaped by geopolitical contingencies, whereby a precarious balance is maintained between hosting the Dalai Lama and the exile government, and ensuring that this presence does not disrupt ties with Beijing. The paper thus foregrounds the role of host-state foreign policy in shaping exile activism, contributing to a richer understanding of the nexus between geopolitics and resistance in exile contexts.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Life for Tibetans in India is shaped by state policies that frame them simultaneously as welcomed guests and as subjects to be contained, a positioning inseparable from India's fraught

geopolitical relationship with China (McConnell 2009; McConnell 2013). This duality is often described as a form of strategic ambivalence, where gestures of protection are interwoven with techniques of constraint. Tibetan bodies, spaces, and actions are governed through anticipatory logics and what we refer to as pre-emptive compliance: a state practice that forecloses dissent before it can materialize.

Critical geopolitics helps situate these practices within broader state strategies. Boundaries between hospitality and suspicion are never fixed; they shift according to the contingencies of foreign policy, national security, or international alliances (Ó Tuathail 1996; Paasi 2002). State actors differentiate subjects not only by legal status but also by their perceived potential as diplomatic assets or liabilities. The logic of containment thus migrates inward: it is enacted not only at international borders but also in refugee settlements, urban neighborhoods, and protest sites (Mountz 2011, 317). Through such routinized practices, such as detentions, surveillance, and restrictions on assembly, anticipatory enforcement is normalized. What appears as “hospitality” becomes continuously recalibrated to align with India’s geopolitical calculus vis-à-vis China.

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) occupies a distinctive place in this framework. Without international recognition or territorial sovereignty, it nevertheless operates with many of the attributes of a state, including taxation,

elections, and the provision of social services (Hess 2009; McConnell 2016). Its existence in India exemplifies what McConnell (2016) terms tacit sovereignty, wherein the Indian state tolerates the TGIE's quasi-governmental operations while retaining full legal jurisdiction. This arrangement underscores the delicate balance India maintains, allowing exile governance but constraining its political expression whenever it risks unsettling diplomatic relations with Beijing.

Critical border studies provide further tools for theorizing these dynamics. Borders are no longer conceived as static territorial lines, but as dispersed, mobile, and enacted across multiple sites (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Paasi 2002). In the Tibetan case, the exile body itself becomes a border site: surveillance, documentation regimes, and spatial containment inscribe the India–China frontier onto the daily lives of Tibetans in Dharamshala, Delhi, and beyond. Protests function as flashpoints where these bordering practices are reactivated, with Indian authorities managing Tibetan dissent to signal both domestic order and external compliance.

Refugee studies and critical migration theory further stress the geopolitical embedding of exile communities. In South Asia, incorporation is rarely mediated through formal refugee law, India is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, but rather through *ad hoc* discretion, bureaucratic improvisations, and local accommodations (Chimni 2003; Samaddar 2003).

Tibetan refugees are thus hosted under conditions that are never fully secure: permitted cultural reproduction and communal self-governance but denied robust legal protection, political agency, or a clear pathway to citizenship.

The contradictions of this arrangement are stark. Tibetans have built sophisticated exile institutions and transnational advocacy networks, yet their very organizational success magnifies their visibility, and therefore their vulnerability, within India's pre-emptive compliance regime. When Tibetan activism risks disrupting India's diplomatic priorities, hospitality gives way to suppression, as seen in routine detentions around Chinese state visits or anniversaries of Tibetan uprisings (Amnesty International 2008).

As an outcome of pre-emptive compliance, feminist scholarship on silencing helps us see how anticipatory state practices extend beyond physical policing to symbolically delimit the horizons of Tibetan political expression. Silencing is not merely the suppression of speech but a structuring of the conditions under which speech is possible (Mahmood 2004; Dingli 2015, 721). Tibetan visibility in India is subject to symbolic silencing, such as restrictions on flag displays or public rhetoric, and material silencing, including pre-emptive detentions and administrative barriers (Phayul 2013; Reuters 2018; The Hindu 2019; AP News 2025).

These practices ensure that exile voices are audibly “present” only within boundaries that do not unsettle the host state’s geopolitical positioning. Taken together, these frameworks illuminate how India manages Tibetan exile life through a complex assemblage of pre-emptive compliance, tacit sovereignty, bordering practices, and symbolic silencing. This produces Tibetan refugees as liminal subjects, present yet peripheral, publicly protected yet quietly policed. Such a framework allows us to move beyond binary readings of hospitality versus hostility, instead recognizing how the politics of exile are entangled with postcolonial state logics, feminist critiques of silencing, and the anticipatory governance characteristic of states caught between humanitarian self-presentation and geopolitical constraint.

Historical Context: The Evolving India-China-Tibet Triangle

The governance of Tibetan exiles in India is deeply embedded in the triangular dynamic between India, China, and the Tibet question. The emergence of contemporary practices of securitization and curtailment of Tibetan movement in India must be situated within the historical trajectory of India’s Tibet policy, which has consistently reflected its broader foreign policy priorities and has been shaped, above all, by its strategic anxieties vis-à-vis China (Garver 2001).

The Tibetan issue was among the earliest and most complex foreign policy challenges facing the newly independent Indian state. New Delhi initially sought to carry forward the colonial legacy of emphasizing Tibetan autonomy under a token Chinese suzerainty and to maintain the privileges inherited from the Raj (Hoffman 2006; Arpi 2017). However, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's aspiration for a larger Indian role in world affairs and leadership of postcolonial Asia soon brought this position under strain. This shift was underpinned by a mix of idealism and pragmatism, the pursuit of non-alignment, Afro-Asian solidarity, and anti-colonialism on the one hand, and considerations of India's military weakness, territorial security, and its domestic vulnerabilities in Kashmir and the Northeast on the other (Garver 2001; Hoffman 2006; Das 2018; Kapoor 2019). Thus, cultivating cordial relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) assumed paramount importance. New Delhi withdrew from any substantive advocacy of Tibetan autonomy, confining itself to "encouraging" it only in a friendly, non-confrontational manner, limiting India's role to that of a benevolent spectator, or at best a potential mediator between Tibet and China should the opportunity arise (Das 2018, 170). While India protested the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, it soon returned to its policy of prioritizing friendly relations with China, culminating in the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement. The agreement, with its emphasis on "mutual respect for territorial integrity

and sovereignty” and “non-interference in internal affairs,” formalized India’s recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and annulled the special trading rights it had inherited from the British (Garver 2001, 45). Thus, from the outset, India’s Tibet policy was subordinated to the imperative of establishing stable relations with Beijing.

However, as Chinese assurances of meaningful Tibetan autonomy rang hollow, with a simultaneous escalation in Chinese military activities along the Himalayan frontier challenging India’s territorial security, there arose an increasing distrust in the years following the agreement (Garver 2001; Pal 2019). The crisis reached a critical turning point with the 1959 Tibetan uprising and its violent suppression by the Chinese state. The flight of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (followed by tens of thousands of his followers) and India’s decision to grant him political asylum set in motion a downward spiral in relations. While Nehru justified the extension of asylum on “moral and humanitarian” grounds (Bhatia 2025), the decision resulted in significant strategic costs. For Beijing, it confirmed long-standing suspicions of Indian intentions over Tibet, injecting a new source of mistrust into bilateral ties. A Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE, now the Central Tibetan Administration) was established in 1959, with Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh emerging as its political and administrative center in 1960, and Tibetan refugees were settled in designated camps across India (Central Tibetan Administration n.d.).

These developments turned India into a site of Tibetan resistance against Chinese authority, with the presence of Tibetan exiles emerging as a constant source of diplomatic tensions. This posed an unprecedented dilemma for the Indian state regarding the governance of the exile population and their activities. India's Tibet policy thus evolved into a careful balancing act, one of extending humanitarian support while avoiding official recognition of the TGIE or endorsement of Tibetan independence. Prime Minister Nehru declared that the asylum was strictly conditional on Indian territory not being employed for hostile activities against the PRC (Arpi 2020). Yet, the lingering mistrust ultimately culminated in the 1962 war and has continued to cast a shadow on relations to this day. Reflecting on the conflict, Mao told a visiting Nepali delegation in 1964 that the real obstacle in Sino-Indian relations was not the McMahon Line but the Tibetan issue (Garver 2001, 156). Scholars have similarly highlighted the centrality of the Tibet problem to the enduring India–China boundary dispute (Topgyal 2011; Garver 2011; Peng, Moda, and Lin 2018).

As relations with China deteriorated in the aftermath of the 1962 war, India's position underwent a marked shift. New Delhi began to tolerate forms of refugee activity that it had hitherto prohibited. It not only allowed the Dalai Lama to proclaim a Tibetan constitution in 1963 and seek international support for the Tibetan cause but also backed

the UN General Assembly resolution in 1965 that called for respecting the fundamental human rights of Tibetans, began to more forcefully reassert Tibetan autonomy as a condition for Chinese sovereignty, and raised a Tibetan military unit, the Special Frontier Force (SSF) (Mehrotra 1998, 295; Garver 2001, 189). This posture continued through the period of suspended relations until the late 1980s. Throughout this period the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) developed and espoused peaceful resistance methods, adopting strategies like political advocacy, international lobbying, religious and cultural preservation, and identity building with emphasis on nonviolent protest, all of which came to be increasingly tolerated by the Indian government (Aukatsang 2019). It began articulating a “Middle Way Approach” in 1974, which called for meaningful autonomy for Tibet within China to be pursued through peaceful means (Office of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet n.d.). Thus, the scope of Tibetan exile politics in India became contingent on the fluctuations in China-India relations, with resistance activities undertaken with relative visibility and ease amidst strained ties in the 1960s and 1970s, albeit under the watchful eyes of the Indian state.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the eight rounds of border talks held between 1981 and 1988, and most significantly the visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Beijing in December 1988, brought about a reset in relations after decades of

estrangement post the 1962 war. High-level contacts were restored, both sides agreed to decouple the boundary issue from broader relations, and a Joint Working Group on the boundary question was established (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China n.d.). The Chinese side raised concerns about the activities of "Chinese Tibetans" in India, to which the Indian prime minister responded by reaffirming that Tibet is an autonomous region of China and reiterating Indian commitment to preventing Tibetans from engaging in anti-China activities on Indian soil (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China n.d.). This heralded a return to a more restrictive approach and tightening controls on exile activities.

The recalibration unfolded against the backdrop of the 1987 pro-independence demonstrations in Lhasa, which prompted Beijing to abandon the relative moderation in policies espoused under Deng Xiaoping since the late 1970s and revert to hardline policies, intensifying repression in Tibet and culminating in the imposition of martial law in 1989 (Topgyal 2012, 45). Another significant factor in this context has been the growing radicalization among second-generation Tibetan exiles, which resulted in the adoption of more confrontational nonviolent methods in response to China's increasingly repressive policies toward Tibet since the late 1980s (Bloch 2023, 350). Beijing, deeply suspicious of the developments' connection to the Dalai Lama and his

supporters, feared that India might exploit the unrest to gain leverage over China amid ongoing border tensions (Carlson 2004, 12). Thus, as Ganguly (1989, 1130) observes, “From the Chinese standpoint, the most significant accomplishment was the explicit acknowledgment by Prime Minister (PM) Gandhi that Tibet is an internal affair of China. Chinese keenness to obtain this Indian endorsement was no doubt closely linked to the recent political stirrings in Tibet.” China’s growing securitization of the Tibetan issue, closely linking it with India–China relations, reverberated across the border, with Beijing’s diplomatic pressure driving India to steadily curtail the political agency of the exile community. This shift set the stage for the emergence of a strategic ambivalence in India’s Tibet policy, whereby it has continued to host the exile community and the government-in-exile while simultaneously constraining their political agency. Such conditional tolerance, coupled with increasing suppression, has resulted in a pattern of silencing of Tibetan political expression in India, a trend examined in greater detail in the following sections.

Hospitality and Legal Ambiguity

India’s reception of Tibetan refugees has often been described as extraordinarily generous. Tibetans are praised as “model refugees” for their adherence to nonviolence, their structured leadership under the Dalai Lama, and their community-based projects that stress self-sufficiency (McConnell 2013, 345).

This model was institutionalized in the early years of exile through the establishment of agricultural settlements across the country. These were designed as self-contained enclaves rather than assimilationist initiatives, consistent with the Dalai Lama's vision of preserving Tibetan culture and India's desire to manage refugee presence without integrating it fully into the polity (McConnell 2009, 120). Yet this celebrated hospitality is also precarious because it lacks a clear legal foundation. India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol and therefore does not operate within an internationally codified refugee rights regime. Instead, Tibetan presence is mediated through domestic statutes such as the Foreigners Act of 1946 and the Registration of Foreigners Act of 1939, under which Tibetans are legally classified as "foreigners" or "aliens." Unlike the figure of the refugee in international law, the foreigner under Indian law does not enjoy a distinct protective framework but is subject to executive discretion. In practical terms, Tibetans enjoy *de facto* refugee status but without formal legal recognition. This ambiguity underpins the conditional nature of their presence: they are officially "guests," a category without juridical definition, implying both indebtedness and revocability. A guest may always be asked to leave, and their welcome is sustained only so long as it aligns with the host's interests.

The legal history of Tibetan documentation further reveals the stratification of refugee rights. Tibetans who arrived

before the late 1970s were commonly issued Registration Certificates (RCs), renewable annually and functioning as de facto residence permits. These documents allowed internal mobility, access to certain services, and, in some cases, facilitated international travel. Research indicates that those who arrived up to the early 1980s generally obtained RCs, while later arrivals, particularly after the 1987 uprisings in Tibet, were often denied (Tibet Justice Center 2011, 5; USCIS 2015). Thus, generational differences in exile correspond to significant divergences in legal security. Moreover, very few Tibetans, even those eligible under India's Citizenship Act, have successfully acquired citizenship. While court rulings have occasionally affirmed the right of Tibetans born in India before 1987 to claim citizenship, administrative reluctance and political sensitivity have made such cases exceptional rather than the norm (Bloch 2023, 352; Legal Service India n.d.). The result is a layered regime of belonging, where Tibetans are present and institutionally organized yet persistently peripheral in legal and political terms.

Containment, Autonomy and Limited Sovereignty

The settlements created for Tibetans offered the TGIE scope to administer housing, welfare, schooling, and local governance, creating the semblance of autonomy. Yet they remain what Fiona McConnell (2009, 125) calls “territorial exceptions,” spaces where Tibetan institutions operate but

only under the umbrella of Indian sovereignty. Indian law ultimately prevails, and the movement of Tibetans into and out of settlements has long been subject to permits and monitoring by local authorities. Many of the early settlements were located in remote, underdeveloped regions, reflecting a strategy of geographic distancing, where Tibetans were offered refuge but kept at the margins of Indian political and economic centers (Houston and Wright 2003, 46).

This arrangement illustrates what might be termed “tacit sovereignty” (McConnell 2009, 130). The TGIE operates like a state in exile; it conducts elections, collects taxes, and organizes community services but without international recognition or control over territory. India tolerates and even facilitates this quasi-sovereignty but only tacitly and always within limits. This duality sustains a paradoxical situation: Tibetans experience both self-rule and dependence, autonomy and containment, visibility and invisibility.

Liminality and the Politics of Pre-emptive Compliance

From the moment the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, accompanied by nearly 80,000 followers, India found itself thrust into an uncomfortable but inescapable geopolitical dilemma. On the one hand, offering asylum to the Dalai Lama accorded with India’s historical image as a civilization rooted in traditions of refuge and hospitality (Tibet Justice Center 2011, 3; Samaddar 2003). The longstanding spiritual connections

between Buddhism in Tibet and India gave the gesture an aura of cultural continuity, while domestically, the move was framed as consistent with India's democratic and humanitarian ethos (Chimni 2003, 200; Hess 2009, 50). On the other hand, sheltering the Tibetan leadership carried immense strategic risks. Jawaharlal Nehru, though celebrated by Tibetans as a benefactor, was by most accounts a reluctant host, acutely aware that this decision would complicate relations with Beijing (Noorani 2000; Mostyn 2008; McConnell 2016, 75). Indeed, India's accommodation of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) in Dharamshala has remained a perennial "thorn in the side" of Sino-Indian relations (Hess 2009, 89). This ambivalence continues to underpin Indian policy, which oscillates between symbolic support and structural containment, between hospitality and suspicion.

The Indian government's practice of "pre-emptive compliance," became distinctly evident beginning with the 1991 visit of Chinese Premier Li Peng to India. Anxious to avoid any embarrassment to the visiting dignitary, a day prior to his arrival, Indian authorities prevented the Dalai Lama from meeting his followers or the press. The police also dispersed and arrested numerous protesters at Majnu Ka Tila, a distant Tibetan settlement in Delhi where a demonstration had been permitted (Chacko 2013). This episode marked the first clear demonstration of "pre-emptive compliance" in action. As India sought to stabilize and deepen relations with China

through the 1990s and into the new millennium, this approach became routinized. Successive bilateral agreements, including mechanisms for border management, trade deals, and regular high-level engagement, saw New Delhi consistently prioritize cordial ties with Beijing over the political freedoms of Tibetan exiles. This led to the consolidation of the suppression of Tibetan dissent as a routine, deliberate, and systematic strategy to contain Tibetan activism before it could disrupt diplomatic ties or sensitive high-profile visits.

The irony of India's Tibet policy is starkly embodied in the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China. The treaty, in name and spirit, gestures toward the stabilization of a fraught border and the cultivation of conditions for regional peace. Yet, in practice, the principle of tranquility has often translated into the silencing of peaceful Tibetan dissent within Indian territory. The pursuit of calm in external relations has required the management of voices in exile. This contradiction came into sharp relief in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when Indian authorities detained Tibetan demonstrators during a protest march, charging them with endangering the "peace and tranquility" of the region (Al Jazeera 2008).

The spectacle of Tibetan protesters being pre-emptively detained, their flags confiscated, and their demonstrations

curtailed in the name of stability exemplifies this irony: peace, here, is achieved not by enabling dissent but by rendering it invisible. This tension between democratic ideals and strategic constraints has long defined India's management of the Tibetan presence on its soil.

It is against this background that India's anticipatory practices—what this paper terms pre-emptive compliance—take shape. Because the Tibetan presence carries immense diplomatic sensitivities, India often acts not in reaction to Tibetan dissent but in anticipation of it, especially during moments of heightened geopolitical attention. This logic of pre-emption is evident during anniversaries of Tibetan uprisings or visits by Chinese dignitaries, when Indian authorities routinely detain Tibetan activists, enforce restrictions on demonstrations, and discourage displays of Tibetan nationalism. During the 2008 Olympic torch relay in Delhi, police detained hundreds of Tibetans, confiscated Tibetan flags, and prohibited their display near the India Gate route. Reports describe activists hiding flags beneath their clothing, which led to mass arrests once they were discovered (Guardian 2008). Similarly, in March 2012, ahead of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit, Delhi Police raided Tibetan hostels and neighborhoods, seizing flags, banners, and placards, and issuing blanket bans on Tibetan national symbols in public spaces (Guardian 2012). Again in October 2019, when Xi Jinping visited Chennai, Tibetan students and activists were detained simply on suspicion of

planning to display black flags or the Tibetan national flag (The Hindu 2019). Despite some domestic discussion for a policy shift after the 2020 Galwan clashes (Rajagopalan 2020), India's subsequent diplomatic engagements and successive boundary negotiations with China underscored its resolve to keep the Tibetan issue from obstructing efforts to stabilize bilateral relations. On 10 March 2025, the anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising, protesters waving flags outside the Chinese embassy in New Delhi were dragged away by police and their banners confiscated (AP News 2025). As New Delhi pursues yet another reset in ties with Beijing, the entrenched pattern of privileging overall bilateral stability over Tibetan political concerns is likely to become even more pronounced.

These incidents illustrate the dual dimensions of silencing (Glenn 2004, 100). Material silencing occurs when bodies are removed from protest sites, detained, or confined in settlements. Symbolic silencing takes place when visual markers of Tibetan identity—flags, slogans, effigies—are banned or erased from public view. Both forms are interconnected outcomes of pre-emptive compliance: India's effort to demonstrate to China that it is a responsible partner willing to suppress activities deemed provocative. The irony, once again, is that such repression occurs not in defiance of India's commitments to peace and tranquility but in fidelity to them.

Feminist scholarship on silencing deepens this understanding by emphasizing that silencing is not merely the absence of speech but an active practice that structures power. It operates materially, by detaining bodies and restricting movements, and symbolically, by curating what can appear in the public sphere. In the Tibetan case, silencing is not incidental but systemic; it is an outcome of India's anticipatory diplomacy. The state acts not because Tibetans have disrupted order but because their potential to do so could embarrass India internationally. Thus, pre-emptive compliance produces a regime where Tibetans are simultaneously hosted and contained, their political agency acknowledged rhetorically yet curtailed practically.

Critical border studies remind us that borders are not merely territorial lines but are enacted through documents, practices, and embodied experiences (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 15; Paasi 2009, 605). For Tibetans in India, the border is written onto the body through the requirement of RCs, the surveillance of protest, and the policing of visibility. Their everyday lives are structured by a form of internal bordering, where access to rights and recognition depends on paperwork that can be withheld, delayed, or revoked at the discretion of the state.

The Tibetan body itself becomes a border site, a site where India's commitment to refuge intersects with its obligation to manage China's sensitivities. Protests are moments when

this embodied border becomes most visible; when flags are unfurled, the Indian state responds by re-imposing the limits of hospitality through detention and censorship. These practices resonate with broader postcolonial patterns in South Asia, where refugees are incorporated not through codified rights but through ad hoc arrangements, executive discretion, and strategic improvisation (Chimni 2003, 210; Samaddar 2003). Tibetans, then, are hosted in a mode that is never fully secure, their status oscillating between protected guests and potential liabilities.

Throughout these dynamics, *realpolitik* remains the underlying thread. India's China policy has consistently demanded a careful balancing act, demonstrating solidarity with Tibetans without jeopardizing bilateral relations. The presence of the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala is both a symbolic asset and a diplomatic liability. On occasion, India has leveraged this presence as a bargaining chip, subtly signaling to China that Tibetan exile politics could be amplified or muted depending on the state of relations (McConnell 2009, 140; Raaj 2025). But more often, the imperative is one of restraint: ensuring that Tibetan activism does not jeopardize border negotiations, trade agreements, or broader geopolitical engagements.

This duality explains why India projects itself internationally as a pluralistic democracy with a tradition of offering refuge, while domestically it curtails Tibetan visibility whenever

such visibility threatens to disrupt the diplomatic status quo. Tibetans are therefore positioned as liminal subjects, simultaneously symbols of India's benevolence and reminders of its constraints, celebrated as guests but governed as foreigners, publicly protected yet quietly policed.

This duality is also visible in other registers. For example, Indian media outlets and strategic commentators frequently invoke the Dalai Lama or the question of Tibet's historical autonomy to underscore the tensions underpinning India–China relations (Joshi 2017). However, in these framings, Tibetans themselves are rendered silent. Their political demands are rarely foregrounded; instead, their symbolic utility lies in affirming India's own positionality vis-à-vis China. Tibetan identity, history, and suffering are reduced to discursive resources for Indian statecraft rather than subjects of policy concern in their own right. Exiled Tibetans, who have built institutions of governance and articulated political aspirations in Dharamshala, are largely excluded from formal diplomatic conversations. This absence is not accidental but a structural effect of India's strategy of pre-emptive compliance. The Indian state carefully manages the spatial and political boundaries of Tibetan exile institutions, ensuring their activities do not directly contradict the state's strategic priorities. During episodes of heightened tension, Indian officials and commentators have occasionally hinted at the possibility of amplifying Tibetan exile politics as a form of pressure on Beijing (Times of India

2017; Times of India 2024; Bajpae and Yu 2025). This dual strategy—invoking Tibet when useful, silencing Tibetans when inconvenient—underscores the structural asymmetry at the heart of India’s Tibet policy. Exiled Tibetans are indispensable symbols in the language of foreign policy, yet their own voices are systematically absent. They are positioned as a diplomatic card to be played or withheld rather than as political actors in their own right.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to outline how Tibetan exile politics in India are profoundly shaped by the contingencies of India–China relations. While the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) are permitted to operate in Dharamshala, their presence is tolerated only tacitly and without recognition in formal diplomatic channels. India insists on retaining the monopoly of representation in its dealings with China, ensuring that Tibet appears in foreign policy discourse only through Indian interests rather than Tibetan agency.

This dynamic produces a distinctive regime of exile governance. On the one hand, Tibetans in India are celebrated symbolically as proof of India’s humanitarian traditions, as moral contrasts to Chinese repression, and occasionally as a diplomatic card hinted at in moments of bilateral tension. On the other hand, they are materially constrained. Their protests are curtailed

through pre-emptive detentions, their flags and symbols banned during sensitive visits, and their institutions closely monitored to ensure compliance with Indian priorities. Such practices exemplify what we term pre-emptive compliance, where state actions foreclose dissent in anticipation of Chinese sensitivities rather than in reaction to actual disorder.

The result is a paradoxical condition of controlled visibility. Tibetans are audibly present in Indian public discourse when their presence affirms national narratives or offers symbolic leverage but fall silent whenever their activism risks unsettling diplomacy. They are permitted to “rehearse the state” through institutions of exile governance yet denied recognition in formal negotiations where the stakes of their political future are most pronounced. In this sense, Tibetan sovereignty in exile exists only tacitly, tolerated but never acknowledged, always dependent on India’s calculations vis-à-vis China. The exile community is indispensable to the language of Indian statecraft but dispensable as political actors. Foregrounding this asymmetry complicates conventional portrayals of India as a benevolent refuge. While India projects itself internationally as a pluralist democracy with a tradition of offering asylum, its actual management of Tibetan life is driven less by humanitarian concern than by realpolitik. Within this framework, Tibetan voices are domesticated within a regime of anticipatory governance, always present but on terms defined by the host state.

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The Merchants of the Eastern Himalayas: The Lhasa Newar and the Indo-Tibetan Interactions in Kalimpong in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

The Lhasa Newar, a merchant community from the Kathmandu Valley known for their artisanal as well as trading expertise, were instrumental in fostering socio-political and economic connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan Plateau. As skilled intermediaries, they facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices across the eastern Himalayas. The term Lhasa Newar refers to Newar traders who established a significant presence in Lhasa, Tibet, while maintaining trade networks that extended from Lhasa to Calcutta. In the early twentieth century, the Kalimpong hills emerged as a vital trade hub linking the Bengal plains with Tibet's mountainous regions, with the Lhasa Newar merchants playing a significant role in trans-Himalayan commerce. This research focuses on identifying the historical origins of Indo-Tibetan interactions, the historical contributions of Lhasa Newar traders, especially in the eastern Himalayan region, where they emerged as the most important merchants of the

eastern Himalayas, and the trading houses that developed in Kalimpong. Additionally, the paper addresses the factors that ultimately led to the decline of the Lhasa Newar merchant community in the eastern Himalayas.

Introduction

The India-Tibet relationship is generally studied and understood in the context of the exchange of Buddhist ideas between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan Plateau, thereby giving little or no emphasis to what is generally referred to as people-to-people interactions. Religion and religious ideas occupy an important position in this relationship, but various existing interactions between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan Plateau also helped in propagating religious ideas. The trans-Himalayan Buddhist trade network developed as a result of the commodification of the material culture of Buddhist material culture and devotion, such as silks, gems, metalwork, amulets, and many others. For many trans-Himalayan communities, trade became a lifestyle. As a result, many of these communities travelled far to trade. The India-Tibet relationship predates the arrival of the British East India Company in the subcontinent, which was in the eighteenth century. The Himalayas, lying between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan Plateau, has long served as a vital convergence point, with numerous routes facilitating interaction and exchange. Some scholars trace the beginning

of formal cultural ties to the marriage of Bhrikuti Devi and Srong Tsang Gampo, yet historical evidence suggests that the northern regions of the Indian subcontinent have maintained continuous engagement with Tibet since prehistoric times.

For many Western travelers, however, Tibet has long remained a land of mystery, spirituality, and fascination, deeply embedded in notions of wonder and sacredness. In 1624, a Portuguese Jesuit named Antonio de Andrade became the first European to travel to Tibet (Wessels 1924, 62). Antonio de Andrade's stay at Tsaparang proved valuable, as he was able to actively gather accurate and detailed information about the extent and state of Tibet. There he learned through Chinese merchants of a place called U Tsang, situated to the east of Tsaparang. In his letter to his mission in India, Andrade suggested that the attempt to reach these territories should be made from Bengal (Wessels 1924, 119). Similarly, interactions such as trade continued with the Indian subcontinent. Mirza Haidar Dughlat, in *Tarikh-I-Rashidi*, gives one of the earliest descriptions of Tibet, which dates back to the early sixteenth century (Ross 1895, 404). Dughlat, who was an army general of Babur, mentions a trading group, the Champas or the Changpas, who descended towards the Indian subcontinent—specifically to Kashmir Valley from Ladakh, then part of the Kingdom of Tibet—in winter to sell salt, clothes made of goat hair, zedoary, gold, and shawls (Ross 1895, 408).

Northern India, in its entirety, maintained deep and continuous interactions with the Tibetan Plateau, facilitated by multiple cultural, religious, and economic exchanges over the centuries. Among the important regions in this network, the Kingdom of Nepal, particularly the Kathmandu Valley, played a pivotal role as a key transit point for trade and pilgrimage routes leading to Tibet. Its strategic location made it an essential hub for merchants, pilgrims, and travelers navigating between the Indian subcontinent and the high Tibetan Plateau. In the early eighteenth century, the Italian Jesuit priest Ippolito Desideri described Kathmandu as a thriving urban centre, home to “many thousands of inhabitants,” bustling with commerce and vibrant markets. According to his account, a significant number of Tibetans and pilgrims from Hindustan frequently visited the city, engaging in active trade and cultural exchange. The commercial importance of Kathmandu was further highlighted by the presence of Kashmiri merchants, who had established permanent offices in the city to manage trade operations, particularly in textiles, precious stones, and other high-value commodities (De Filippi 1931, 318). In the northern Himalayan region, the main occupation of the people was trade (Stiller 1973, 24). For example, the Bhotiyas who engaged in the Tibet trade bartered salt for grain in the Tarai, and these bags of grain were exchanged for other commodities deemed necessary for the Bhotiyas themselves in Tibet. The rate of exchange of these commodities varied

according to the distance the produce had to be carried (Stiller 1973, 24–25).

The Indo-Tibetan Interaction under the British East India Company

The economic and political interest in Tibet by the British East India Company during the eighteenth century was mainly due to the then-prevailing conditions of the Company in the Indian subcontinent. With the addition of political responsibilities, the finances of the Company suffered (Owen 1934, 25). The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 had devastating effects on the people of Bengal as well as the financial conditions of the province. There was a desperate need for new channels of commerce and commercial ventures. Before Warren Hastings was assigned as the Governor-General of Bengal in 1771, the Court of Directors inquired about the possibility of northern trade and of sending explorers to Bhutan and Assam (Sarkar 1931, 121). The British East India Company's perception of Tibetan trade, under the leadership of Warren Hastings, materialized during the First Bhutan War between 1772 and 1774 (Deb 1976, 54–55). The first diplomatic interaction between the British East India Company in Calcutta and the Tibetan government at Lhasa was Bogle's mission, led by George Bogle, a civil servant of the British East India Company. George Bogle's mission was unique in the sense that this was the first attempt to establish a diplomatic mission

to Tibet. The alleged Bhutanese invasion of the Kingdom of Koch in 1772 brought the Company into close proximity with the politics of the eastern Himalayas. The King of Koch requested assistance from the Governor-General of Bengal, and as a result, the Governor-General sent a battalion of native infantry to assist the King of Koch (Bysack 1890, 52). The Bhutanese monarch requested the regent of Tibet, the Tashi Lama, to intervene on his behalf. As a result, Tashi Lama wrote a letter to Warren Hastings in 1773 for immediate mediation (Bysack 1890, 61). This mediation was concluded with a treaty between the Government of Bengal and the monarch of Bhutan in 1774. Arabinda Deb writes that the 1774 treaty initiated a policy of pursuing Bhutan in the interest of trans-Himalayan trade (Deb 1976, 57). George Bogle's mission was successful in a way that it helped establish a relationship with the Third Panchen Lama, who was held in high esteem by Emperor Chien-Lung (Deb 1976, 57). In the eastern Himalayas, Bhutan became an access point between the Indian subcontinent and Tibet. After the 1774 treaty between the Government of Bengal and Bhutan, the Bhutanese monarch agreed to allow merchants to carry on their trade between the Indian subcontinent, more specifically between Bengal and Tibet. A recorded statement of a Bhutanese Zinkaff in 1833 mentions a Mougol Khasee trading at Lhasa and occasionally moving to Rangpur in then Bengal by the Pa-ri and Paro Dzong routes for the purchase of other skins (Deb 1976, 61).

Over time, the eastern Himalayas gradually gained preference over the western Himalayas as a strategic route for cross-border interactions, and by the nineteenth century, this shift had become more evident. The noted nineteenth-century naturalist and ethnologist Brian H. Hodgson emphasized the geographical advantages of the eastern Himalayan region. He regarded it as a more suitable corridor for fostering Indo-Tibetan trade, given its accessible routes, thriving markets, and closer proximity to key trading centres, thereby highlighting the region's growing importance in the economic and cultural exchanges between India and Tibet (Hodgson 1874, 97). In 1857, Brian H. Hodgson observed that the western Tibetan region was largely poor, remote, and rugged, making it less favourable for large-scale trade. He noted that the more significant towns such as U Tsang, Kham, and Sifan, situated closer to China, supplied essential materials such as shawl wool and also served as ready markets for British goods. Based on these observations, Hodgson concluded that the most efficient and strategic transit routes across the Himalayas lay through Kathmandu and Darjeeling, making these regions vital gateways for Indo-Tibetan trade. It was also due to significant political changes in the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal that the eastern trade routes gradually became more favourable. After Prithvinarayan Shah's conquest of the Kathmandu Valley and the subsequent political unification of Nepal, the flow of Indo-Tibetan trade through Kathmandu diminished

considerably, leading to a shift in traditional trade routes and altering the commercial dynamics of the region (Lewis 1990, 172). Prithvinarayan Shah grew suspicious of the Lhasa Newar merchants due to their close association with the Malla kings. Consequently, he restricted and eventually cut off the flow of trade through Kathmandu (Bell 1928, 118). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, a new trade route to Tibet emerged via Kalimpong, reshaping the dynamics of Indo-Tibetan commerce.

The Lhasa Newar Merchants of Kalimpong

The eighteenth century was a significant phase in the history of the Indian subcontinent, marked by the development of territories and the exploration of new frontiers. In the context of the British East India Company's ambitions concerning India-Tibet relations, the Bengal government operated under the assumption that the Himalayan states functioned as completely independent entities. It was largely on the basis of this belief that the Sikkim and Bhutan campaigns were carried out and successfully concluded without causing any major international complications (Lamb 1960, 127). In this context, the Duars War of the nineteenth century holds significant importance. As a result of this conflict, over one-fifth of Bhutan's territories were ceded to the British East India Company. A treaty was subsequently concluded, through which the British Government's rights over all the

Bhutan Duars, including those in Assam, the taluk of Ambari-Falakata, and the hill territory on the left bank of the Tista River, were formally recognized (Deb 1976, 156). These territories were ceded unconditionally, effectively severing Bhutan's direct control over Sikkim. This development also opened up new possibilities for expanding trade with Tibet through the Chumbi Valley, as the primary threat to the Kingdom of Sikkim had now been eliminated. With Sikkim now secure from the Bhutanese threat and the acquisition of new territories, including the present-day subdivision of Kalimpong, the hill territory of Darjeeling was significantly expanded, thereby further facilitating and strengthening trade routes with Tibet.

In his book *Syamukapu*, D. S. Kansakar Hilker explains that Nepal is broadly home to two distinct groups based on their racial and linguistic affiliations. The first group comprises the Gorkhas or Parbatias, who speak Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language. The second group belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, within which the Newars are classified (Hilker 2005, 11). He further writes that the Newars can be roughly divided into Hindu Newars and Buddhist Newars and are primarily concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley (Hilker 2005, 11). It is generally believed that the Newars settled in Kalimpong primarily due to the growth of Tibetan trade in the region. However, an interesting alternative perspective emerges from an oral account collected during an interview

with a descendant of one of the old Lhasa Newar trading families. According to Yogbir Shakya, a member of this prominent trading community, the arrival of the Lhasa Newars in Kalimpong was not initially motivated by trade. Instead, he recalls that their presence in the region was linked to a royal wedding in Bhutan, which attracted several Newar families who were invited due to their expertise in artisanal work, craftsmanship, and ceremonial arrangements. The interviewee shared that his grandfather, Purnabir Shakya, and his father, Harkabir Shakya, were both prominent traders in the region. Purnabir Shakya, originally a merchant from Kathmandu, played a significant role in establishing the family's trading network, which later became influential in trans-Himalayan trade.

The commonly held belief that all Newars who migrated from Nepal were primarily traders is not entirely accurate. According to Yogbir Shakya, the Newar migrants belonged to two distinct groups based on their place of origin and professional background. The craftsmen and artisans among the Newars typically hailed from Patan, a renowned center for traditional artistry, metalwork, wood carving, and other skilled crafts. In contrast, the affluent Newar businessmen and traders generally came from Kathmandu, where established commercial networks and access to resources allowed them to participate actively in trans-Himalayan trade. He further explains that the earliest Newars to settle in the Darjeeling

hills were primarily from Patan. These early settlers were largely artisans who brought with them their specialized craftsmanship, contributing significantly to the region's cultural and artistic development. Over time, however, as the Tibet trade via Kalimpong expanded, a growing number of Kathmandu-based Newar traders also migrated to the area, establishing trading houses and participating in the flourishing Indo-Tibetan commerce. According to the interviewee, his grandfather, Purnabir Shakya, and father, Harkabir Shakya, were among the earliest pioneers to establish a courier service between Kalimpong and Lhasa, which became one of the first organized courier networks in the region. Their enterprise played a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of goods, documents, and correspondence across the challenging Himalayan terrain at a time when modern communication and transportation systems were virtually nonexistent. The success of Purnabir and Harkabir's courier business can be attributed largely to the longstanding socio-economic and cultural relationship between the Newar community and the Tibetans. For centuries, the Lhasa Newars had cultivated strong networks of trust, trade, and cultural interaction with Tibetan merchants, monasteries, and officials. These pre-existing relationships provided them with preferential access to trade routes, security along the transit corridors, and a dependable client base that relied on their services. Their courier operations were not limited to carrying letters and

messages but also transported small consignments of high-value commodities, such as religious artifacts, which were vital to sustaining the Indo-Tibetan trade. The business became an essential link between Kalimpong, a growing trade hub in the Darjeeling hills, and Lhasa, the central marketplace of Tibet.

The growth of Kalimpong as a prominent marketplace was not accidental but rather shaped by its strategic geographical location and its proximity to the Calcutta port, which served as one of the most important gateways for international trade during the colonial period. Unlike many traditional routes connecting Kathmandu to Lhasa, which were rugged, treacherous, and prone to natural hazards, Kalimpong offered a relatively safer and more accessible transit corridor for merchants engaging in Indo-Tibetan trade. For the Lhasa Newars, this proximity to Calcutta's bustling port provided a significant economic advantage. It allowed them to import a wide range of manufactured British goods, including textiles, radios, clocks, and many other items, directly from the city's commercial markets and then transport these items to Lhasa and other Tibetan trading centres. Similarly, commodities from Tibet, such as wool, musk, salt, and precious stones, could be exported efficiently to Calcutta and from there to international markets. Additionally, Kalimpong's location, nestled in the Darjeeling hills yet directly connected to British India's trade infrastructure, meant that it evolved into a key intermediary hub between the Himalayan highlands and the Indian plains.

This dual connectivity to both Tibet via the Jelep La and Nathu La passes and global markets via Calcutta made Kalimpong an ideal point for consolidating and redistributing goods. The Lhasa Newar merchants recognized this potential early on and established trading houses in Kalimpong, positioning themselves as vital intermediaries in the trans-Himalayan economy. The accessibility of British-controlled Calcutta, combined with established social and cultural networks with Tibetans, allowed them to expand their economic influence, diversify their trade, and reduce dependence on the older, riskier Kathmandu-Lhasa trade routes.

Conclusion

There exist several debates surrounding the decline of the Lhasa Newar merchants in the eastern Himalayas, and scholars as well as descendants of the traders hold differing perspectives on the causes behind this downfall. According to Yogbir Shakya, the decline cannot be attributed to a single factor but rather to a combination of political, cultural, and economic changes that reshaped the trans-Himalayan trade network. Yogbir particularly emphasizes the religious composition of the Newar community that settled in Kalimpong. He notes that the majority of these traders were Buddhist Newars, as opposed to the Shaiva Newars. This religious identity, according to him, had direct implications for their security and stability in Lhasa, which served as the primary hub of

their economic activities. Therefore, after the change in the political administrative setup in Lhasa, many of these Newars felt insecure, and as a result many left. The Buddhist Newars, who had traditionally enjoyed certain privileges and networks in Lhasa, began to feel increasingly insecure under the new power dynamics and growing political uncertainty in Tibet.

As a result, many Lhasa Newar families gradually withdrew from Lhasa, shifting their focus to other centres of trade, while others relocated entirely, leading to a sharp decline in their dominance over the Kalimpong-Lhasa trade route. Interestingly, Yogbir Shakya highlights a divergence in the way different groups within the Lhasa Newar community responded to these political and economic disruptions. The business class, composed primarily of wealthy merchants engaged in large-scale trade, were among the first to return to Kathmandu. They sought the relative stability of the Kathmandu Valley, where they could reinvest their capital and rebuild their economic networks within the emerging commercial hubs of Nepal. Their decision to relocate was influenced not only by the shrinking trade opportunities in Tibet but also by growing concerns over political insecurity and uncertainty. In contrast, the Newar artisans—many of whom were highly skilled in metalwork, wood carving, painting, and traditional craftsmanship—chose to remain in Kalimpong and nearby regions. Unlike the merchant elite, whose livelihoods depended on long-distance trans-Himalayan

commerce, the artisans were deeply rooted in local economies. They continued to supply handcrafted items, religious art, and decorative pieces to monasteries, traders, and local patrons in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Sikkim. Their craft-based livelihoods allowed them to adapt more easily to the changing political environment, as they were not entirely reliant on cross-border trade. This division within the Lhasa Newar community highlights an important transformation in the region's socio-economic landscape. While the merchant families reoriented themselves towards Kathmandu and shifted their business strategies to fit the changing dynamics of Nepal's economy, the artisan communities contributed significantly to the local cultural and artistic heritage of Kalimpong and the eastern Himalayas.

Yogbir Shakya attributes a significant part of the decline of the Lhasa Newar merchants in the eastern Himalayas to the gradual collapse of cottage industries during the twentieth century. According to him, the Lhasa Newars had historically been deeply involved in various small-scale, home-based industries such as weaving, metalwork, wool processing, and the production of artisanal goods, many of which were traded extensively across the Indo-Tibetan frontier. These cottage industries had formed the economic backbone of Newar commercial success for generations, linking their production networks in the Kathmandu Valley and Kalimpong with broader markets in Tibet, Bengal, and beyond. However, the

twentieth century marked a period of profound economic transformation in the Indian subcontinent. With the advent of industrialization and the introduction of machine-made goods, first under British colonial influence and later during India's own post-independence modernization efforts, the traditional cottage industries struggled to compete.

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The Tibet Factor in India-China Relations: Historical Legacies and Diplomatic Tensions

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Abstract

Since the Simla (Shimla) Convention of 1914, Tibet has emerged again as a major point of contention in India-China diplomatic relations. The signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement between China and Tibet in 1951, the Dalai Lama's asylum in India in 1959, and the Sino-Indian War of 1962 entrenched Tibet as both a territorial and ideological dispute. Tibet continues to be a significant factor in India-China bilateral relations. Theoretically, securitisation theory conceptualises Tibet as a securitised entity in China's political discourse and a territorial concern in India-China relations. Complementing securitisation theory, constructivism highlights the identity and legitimacy of Tibetans. In this context, Tibet functions as a strategic variable in India-China engagement. Analysing Tibet's role in security discourse and strategic policymaking is therefore essential. Existing scholarship has tended to focus on the Tibetan diaspora, exile politics, or Sino-Tibetan relations, often neglecting Tibet's role in India-China political engagement. The Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan

Valley clash in 2020 are reminders of the persistence of latent conflict. Misjudged diplomacy could still lead to escalation. India and China must therefore recalibrate their engagement to avoid further misadventure.

Keywords: Border conflict, diplomacy, India-China relations, securitisation, Tibet.

Introduction

The Tibet question has followed India-China relations and has shaped both their historical trajectory and diplomatic psychology. Although contemporary discourse often focuses on border disputes in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, the roots of bilateral mistrust lie in Tibet's contested status. The entry of the People's Liberation Army into Tibet in 1950 and India's decision to grant asylum to the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959 have remained persistent irritants in India-China relations. As a result, Tibet became a site of overlapping claims and irreconcilable narratives.

China views Tibet as a core interest that is non-negotiable. Chinese core interests are tied to sovereignty, legitimacy, and territorial integrity. Beijing situates Tibet within its broader narrative of the "century of humiliation," a term associated with foreign domination of China. In this framing, Tibet's incorporation into China is presented as a historical correction and a strategic necessity against foreign interference in internal

affairs. For India, Tibet is viewed primarily through the lenses of security and symbolic significance.

Tibet became a friction point after India's independence in 1947 and China's "liberation" in 1949. This was due to divergent views on border demarcation and competing political narratives. Understanding Tibet's complexity is essential to explaining why it continues to generate a trust deficit in one of Asia's most consequential relationships.

Theoretical Framework

Moving beyond realist paradigms that reduce state behaviour to material threats, securitisation theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, explains how political issues are transformed into existential security concerns through discursive practices. According to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, securitisation occurs when actors frame an issue as an existential threat to a referent object, thereby legitimising extraordinary action outside normal political procedures (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998).

China's projection of Tibet as a core interest is a calculated securitising strategy that places the region at the centre of its internal and external security thinking. This securitisation intensified after the 2008 Tibetan uprising and the Beijing Olympics, when Tibetan activism was presented as a foreign-backed separatist conspiracy. China then enacted laws such

as the National Security Law (2015) and the Ethnic Unity Law (2020), extending securitisation and authoritarian control across the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). These laws reinforced a Han-centric model of national identity, weakened preferential ethnic protections, and promoted enforced assimilation, thereby securitising Tibetan identity itself (International Campaign for Tibet 2020). China has used legal and punitive measures to transform cultural difference into a security threat, legitimising surveillance and coercion.

Securitisation also depends on public acceptance. Domestically, continuous nationalist education and propaganda have created a receptive audience within China that accepts Tibet as inseparable from the Chinese state. Internationally, however, the Chinese narrative faces resistance, especially from liberal democracies that value Tibetan identity and autonomy. In India, the decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959, while still recognising Chinese sovereignty, generated a symbolic counter-narrative. From Beijing's perspective, India's actions subvert sovereignty and reinforce threat perceptions. As Hansen notes, securitisation is intersubjective and shaped through interaction (Hansen 2006). India's support for the Tibetan community thus perpetuates China's securitisation of Tibet.

The securitised status of Tibet also shapes military strategy. This is visible in China's infrastructure development and PLA

deployment on the Tibetan Plateau. The buildup reflects both internal stability concerns and the need to defend the international border. India and China do not have an accepted international boundary, but the de facto Line of Actual Control (LAC) divides them. Tibet's location in the LAC zone further securitises it. China's securitisation of Tibet evokes India's counter-perceptions of Chinese expansionism and intensifies mistrust. The result is a recursive loop in which Tibetan identity is securitised internally, externalised in China's foreign policy, and reinforced by India's responses.

Constructivism offers another way to understand the Tibet conflict. As Wendt argues, the international system is shaped by how states perceive one another rather than by fixed rules. China has been described as a “pessoptimist nation,” meaning it sees its future through both anxiety and hope (Callahan 2010). For China, Tibet symbolises both past victimhood under Western imperialism and the cultural superiority of a newly powerful state. India, by contrast, presents itself as a diverse democratic country that hosts the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. In doing so, India projects itself as a safe haven for diversity and moral leadership (Acharya 2004). These opposing self-images produce fundamentally different claims about legitimacy and control.

Identity-based conflicts are difficult to resolve through material compromise alone (Hopf 2002). India's strategic ambiguity

is reflected in its avoidance of direct engagement with Tibet even as it accelerates border infrastructure development. This reveals the tension between identity-driven foreign policy and realist urgency. China's confidence in civilisational revival coexists with insecurity over national unity, and the securitisation of Tibetan identity exposes that insecurity. Together, these factors push India and China toward a zero-sum understanding of the conflict. Tibet thus becomes a crucial battleground, both symbolically and strategically.

Tibet and Bilateral Relations

The Tibet issue has entangled sovereignty, legitimacy, and security in India-China relations. In 1914, Britain convened the Simla Conference, where British India sought to define a Himalayan border through negotiation with Tibetan officials. Britain's objective was to create Tibet as a buffer zone. The McMahon Line, produced in the aftermath of the conference, never became a mutually accepted border; its legitimacy therefore remained contested (Lamb 1966). China refused to ratify the agreement and rejected both the McMahon Line and Tibet's right to conduct external relations. For Beijing, the Simla process violated Chinese sovereignty as understood through Qing-era claims and Republican nationalism (Shakya 1999).

Lhasa and London accepted the McMahon Line, but China did not sign the Simla Agreement, even though it participated

in the process. This ensured that the boundary remained disputed. The colonial legacy was inherited by independent India, producing long-term distrust. The Simla process limited Tibet's diplomatic role and strengthened Chinese perceptions of foreign encroachment, while India inherited a boundary dispute that later contributed to the 1962 war.

The 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement, formally titled the Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, marked Tibet's incorporation into the People's Republic of China and affirmed a limited autonomy framework. China presents it as a voluntary agreement, but it remains controversial because the Dalai Lama and his supporters later argued that it was signed under duress (Goldstein 1997). The agreement reflected unequal power relations: China sought integration into the PRC, while Tibet had limited capacity to resist.

India's first effort to normalise relations came through Nehru's recognition of Chinese sovereignty in the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement. This did not, however, resolve the border issue. India later hosted the Dalai Lama in recognition of Tibet's distinctiveness. The Tibetan uprising of March 1959 became a watershed moment, transforming Tibet from a contested frontier into an existential security concern for Beijing and a diplomatic irritant for India. PLA intrusions, land reforms, and

restrictions on religious practice triggered the revolt, which culminated in mass protests in Lhasa and the Dalai Lama's escape to India (Goldstein 1989).

The uprising is narrated by China that Tibetan dissent was externally instigated, paving the way for the dismantling of Tibetan institutions and the extension of direct central control. Tibet was securitised as a frontier territory requiring assimilation. India's humanitarian grant of asylum to the Dalai Lama intensified Sino-Indian tensions by reinforcing China's perception that India was complicit in Tibetan separatism (Maxwell 1970). The establishment of the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala fixed this perception and linked the refugee issue directly to bilateral mistrust.

By the mid-1950s, China's construction of the G219 highway through Aksai Chin and the militarisation of Tibet had eliminated Tibet's role as a buffer, bringing the PLA directly to India's frontier. The Sino-Indian border conflict emerged from competing claims over Aksai Chin and the McMahon Line, exacerbated by China's control of Tibet and India's forward policy, culminating in the 1962 war (Garver 2001). Chinese leaders increasingly viewed the border dispute through the lens of sovereignty threats originating in Tibetan exile activism (Li 2012). New Delhi, in turn, began to regard Chinese consolidation of Tibet as a direct threat to India's border security.

Klaus Pringsheim argued that the war was inseparable from China's conquest of Tibet, which converted ambiguous frontier zones into militarised borders (Pringsheim 1963). Tibet also figured in Cold War geopolitics. China viewed CIA training of Tibetan guerrillas, reportedly in cooperation with India, as a destabilising intervention on its frontier. These covert operations confirmed Chinese suspicions of Tibet as a platform for foreign subversion, making securitisation and militarisation of the Himalayan border appear necessary (Riedel 2015). This triangular dynamic—Tibetan exile activism, Indian sanctuary, and U.S. intelligence support—made confrontation increasingly likely and placed Tibet at the centre of great-power rivalry.

Each episode deepened the entanglement of Tibet with sovereignty claims, strategic calculations, and identity politics: the buffer-state conception at Simla, the coercive incorporation of 1951, the uprising and asylum of 1959, and the militarised conflict of 1962. These legacies continue to shape threat perceptions and keep Tibet at the centre of contemporary disputes. Securitisation and constructivism together show why Tibet remains so significant in bilateral relations. For India, Tibet represents the loss of a buffer zone; for China, it represents resistance to foreign interference in domestic affairs.

Tibet as a Strategic Variable

China considers Tibet an inseparable part of the state, and this belief forms a cornerstone of its domestic and foreign policy. The official Chinese narrative insists that Tibet has belonged to China since antiquity. The 1951 incorporation is described in Chinese terminology as “peaceful liberation,” a positive step that ended feudalism and brought modern life under Communist rule (The State Council Information Office of the PRC 2021). Beyond the historical claim, Tibet is framed as essential to state power, national unity, and sovereignty. Any deviation from the Chinese line—whether foreign criticism, Tibetan protest, or symbolic diplomacy—is treated as a threat requiring correction.

China has also pursued Tibet through state-led development and integration strategies. The pairing-aid programme links less-developed Tibetan areas with wealthier Chinese provinces to accelerate economic growth in the TAR through capital, expertise, and cadre deployment. Initiatives such as the Aid-Tibet Cadres programme and boarding schools for Tibetan students serve a dual purpose: they promote development while integrating Chinese culture and governance. The Qinghai-Tibet Railway exemplifies this combination of modernisation and strategic control by improving civilian and military mobility (Guo 2016). Although Beijing presents such projects as development measures, they are widely understood as mechanisms of control and assimilation.

By elevating Tibet to the status of a core interest, China places it alongside Taiwan and the South China Sea, issues on which compromise is politically difficult. China's core interests include state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, national reunification, and the political system (Information Office of the State Council 2011). This securitisation narrative links domestic stability to external defence, legitimising military buildup, surveillance, and diplomatic pressure. Official rhetoric portrays Tibet's incorporation as a benign act of liberation and rejects dissent as separatism, splittism, or foreign interference. The policy space is therefore narrow, and symbolic acts by other states—such as Indian officials meeting the Dalai Lama—elicit disproportionate responses because they unsettle the underlying security narrative.

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) argues that the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement was imposed rather than consensual and characterises Chinese rule as a period of repression, cultural loss, and economic exploitation (Central Tibetan Administration 2015). Claude Arpi shares this interpretation, portraying Tibet not as a settled region but as an occupied territory that continues to generate instability in the Himalayas (Arpi 2020). These competing claims challenge China's attempt to close the Tibet question at the international level.

India, meanwhile, does not recognise the Tibetan government-in-exile but allows it to operate in Dharamsala. Tibetan

refugees have also been incorporated into India's security architecture through the Special Frontier Force (SFF), a covert unit established in 1962 with CIA assistance and composed largely of Tibetan exiles trained for high-altitude operations (Raman 2007). The SFF's discreet role, from the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War to operations at Pangong Tso in 2020, shows how Tibet remains embedded in India's defence planning even as policymakers avoid openly weaponising Tibetan activism. Tibetan recruits offer India specialised high-altitude capabilities, but policymakers carefully calibrate their utility by avoiding overt use of the Tibet card while allowing quiet signalling, limited public appearances, and selective international facilitation for Tibetan leaders.

The 2017 Doklam standoff began when China attempted to build a road from the Chumbi Valley in the TAR toward the Doklam plateau. China treated this as an infrastructure project, but India saw it as a threat to the Siliguri Corridor, or "Chicken's Neck," the narrow land bridge connecting India's northeast to the rest of the country. The 73-day standoff forced China to abandon the project and demonstrated how infrastructure in Tibet directly affects the regional balance of power (Sun 2020).

The 2020 Galwan Valley clash further downgraded India-China relations. Chinese infrastructure and improved logistical access across the Tibetan Plateau facilitated troop movement

into Ladakh, making the clash an act of strategic assertion (Curtis and Grossman 2023). For Beijing, defending Galwan was tied to protecting Tibet, which remains a political red line. For New Delhi, the clash highlighted the urgent need to upgrade border infrastructure and shift toward long-term strategic competition. The deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese casualties exposed how fragile confidence-building mechanisms become once Tibet is militarised as a security frontier.

Tibet's geography—frozen terrain, high passes, and major river systems—creates both opportunities and difficulties for China. The plateau allows Beijing to monitor northern and northeastern India, but it also complicates the movement of troops and supplies. China has built 624 “well-off border villages” (Xiaokang Villages) in the TAR to reinforce civilian presence and create infrastructure that can serve both civilian and military purposes. In response, India's Director General of the Border Roads Organisation, Lt. Gen. Raghu Srinivasan, announced that within five years India's military would be able to deploy across every part of its border (Arunachal Observer 2025). This competition over infrastructure illustrates Tibet's centrality to the long-term strategic rivalry between the two countries.

Any challenge to Beijing's authority in Tibet is treated as interference in China's internal affairs and as a threat to local

governance in the TAR (Hao 2000). For India, however, Tibet remains a strategic variable: one that is not openly instrumentalised but cannot be ignored. India's democratic and pluralist principles led it to provide refuge to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan institutions. At the same time, New Delhi has maintained enough diplomatic flexibility to protect its security interests.

India understands that turning Tibet into a bargaining chip could escalate the conflict. Geography, infrastructure competition, and competing historical narratives have all strained India-China relations. As climate change, water security, dam construction, and great-power rivalry intensify, tensions along the Himalayan border are likely to deepen. Tibet's relevance as both a security issue and a symbolic flashpoint will therefore continue to grow.

Diplomatic Narratives and Identity Contestations

China's official position on Tibet rests on three claims: historical succession, legal agreement, and liberation. First, China argues that its control over Tibet has an unbroken historical lineage extending to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). It presents the Mongol and Manchu empires as Chinese dynastic formations in order to imply that Tibet has always belonged within China. Second, it relies on the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement, claiming that the Dalai Lama signed it voluntarily. It also cites constitutional law and international treaties such as the 1907

Anglo-Russian and 1908 Anglo-Chinese agreements. Finally, China presents the takeover of Tibet as a “peaceful liberation” that ended feudalism and introduced modernisation, while dismissing Tibetan resistance as foreign-backed separatism (Grunfeld 1996). This three-part argument informs China’s domestic and international policy.

Historically, however, Sino-Tibetan relations were structured through a tribute-paying system that was symbolic rather than evidence of direct political subordination. Tibet’s relationship with China was not fundamentally different from that of neighbouring polities such as Korea or Mongolia, which also participated in this ceremonial order. The principal reason for China’s takeover of Tibet in 1950 was strategic rather than historical or ideological (Norbu 1999).

India’s position remains ambiguous. Although it recognised Tibet as an integral part of PRC in 2003, it continues to host the Dalai Lama, the CTA, and a large community of Tibetan refugees. Through this, India has strengthened its soft power in Buddhist-majority countries and among global human rights institutions (Mehrotra 2000). This allows India to invoke Tibet as a cultural and geopolitical asset without directly intensifying sovereignty disputes. It frames the issue in terms of identity and historical justice.

Tibet functions as a soft power instrument for both India and China, but in different ways. In India’s case, the Dalai Lama and

the CTA symbolise Buddhist heritage and democratic values. India presents its support for the Tibetan exile community as humanitarian rather than political. This portrayal gives India the image of a protector of Tibetan culture and aligns with soft power, which works by attracting others through values rather than coercion (Nye 2004). India's efforts, such as the Global Buddhist Summit and the promotion of Bodhi Gaya and other pilgrimage sites, reinforce its reputation as a guardian of Buddhism. This also strengthens its ties with Buddhist-majority countries.

China, by contrast, seeks to use Tibet as a showcase of socialist modernisation and ethnic unity. White papers such as *Tibet Since 1951: Liberation, Development, Prosperity* emphasise poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and cultural preservation under Chinese governance (State Council Information Office 2021). This curated image attempts to recast Tibet from a site of political contestation into a symbol of benevolence and development. China projects itself as the guarantor of Tibetan cultural survival, countering exile, Western, and Indian narratives of repression.

According to Finnemore and Sikkink, a norm entrepreneur is an organisation or individual that works to change established norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). In this context, the CTA and the Tibetan diaspora function as norm entrepreneurs by mobilising international networks to reframe Tibet as

a question of human rights, cultural survival, and self-determination. Their moderate demand for genuine autonomy is more acceptable to Western governments and international NGOs. Tibetan communities in North America and Europe reinforce this effort through lobbying, protests, and online campaigns, keeping Tibet on the international agenda.

India's policy toward the Tibetan exile community is an example of calibrated ambiguity. On the one hand, India recognises Tibet as part of China. On the other, it continues to host the Dalai Lama and the CTA. This enables India to advocate for cultural freedom without openly endorsing Tibetan political claims (Joshi 2017). Tibet is therefore not an end in itself for Indian policymakers; it is a strategic instrument within India's broader engagement with China.

Exile leaders continue to keep Tibet in the global spotlight. The Dalai Lama's foreign visits attract international media coverage and draw attention to Tibet's cause. At the same time, this activism reinforces China's view that Tibet is a security threat. Beijing interprets such activities as separatism disguised as cultural engagement (Zhang 2023). It responds with diplomatic protests and economic pressure against host countries. This paradox of exile diplomacy means that Tibetan activism increases visibility and moral legitimacy while also reinforcing China's image of the Dalai Lama as a foreign-backed destabiliser.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Tibet has not become a standalone policy but a tactical instrument in India's wider engagement with China. New Delhi has occasionally used the Dalai Lama and the "South Tibet" issue as diplomatic signals in response to Chinese obstruction on issues such as India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership or the UN designation of Masood Azhar as a terrorist (Hailin 2018). The Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh was therefore not a wholesale policy shift but a measured demonstration of India's willingness to challenge Chinese sensitivities when necessary. Tibet under Modi thus functions primarily as symbolic pressure, deployed selectively in bargaining rather than as a fully reoriented Tibet policy.

India and China's disagreements over Tibet show that the issue remains highly combustible and can spiral if mishandled. Any attempt to manage the conflict must address its symbolic dimensions and move beyond posturing toward trust-building and mutual respect.

Policy Implications and the Need for a Diplomatic Reset

India's Tibet policy is a balancing act between its difficult relationship with China and its commitment to Tibetans. This strategic ambiguity is visible in the Ministry of Home Affairs document on Tibetan rehabilitation, which acknowledges Chinese sovereignty while also affirming India's role in protecting Tibetan identity (Ministry of Home Affairs, FFR

Division 2014). To improve bilateral relations, India could go beyond symbolism and explore approaches such as Buddhist diplomacy. This could ease tensions and enhance India's legitimacy without provoking an adverse reaction from Beijing.

The 1993 and 1996 agreements on confidence-building measures established rules on troop placement and border management, helping to reduce tensions related to Tibet. However, these CBMs have been weakened by events such as the Doklam standoff and the Galwan clash. This shows how fragile such mechanisms become when nationalism and distrust dominate. New diplomatic arrangements should recognise that Tibet is both a geopolitical fault line and an issue of national integration for China. India's strategic calculus complicates this further. One possible step would be to create an informal forum for dialogue on cultural preservation, environmental concerns, and water security. Such an initiative would not resolve sovereignty disputes, but it could build trust and reduce the risk of armed conflict.

In 1988, the Dalai Lama presented the Strasbourg Proposal to the European Parliament. In that speech, he shifted the Tibetan objective from full independence to a "Middle Way" approach. The proposal called for genuine self-governance for Tibet within China, with Tibet managing its own cultural, linguistic, religious, and educational affairs while China retained responsibility for defence and foreign policy (Tibet Bureau

1988). This reframed Tibet as a question of cultural survival and reconciliation. Although China rejected the proposal, it continues to influence European perceptions of Tibet and their relations with China.

From a constructivist perspective, the Tibet conflict has also become a debate over the successor to the Dalai Lama, a clash between competing beliefs and institutional claims. China asserts that it has the right, as a sovereign state, to control the reincarnation process. The Tibetan community in exile argues that this is a matter of religious and cultural freedom and that Tibetans should determine the process themselves. India is in a precarious position because it hosts the current Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. China pressures India to accept its chosen successor, while Tibetans and many democratic states expect India to defend religious freedom. How India handles this issue will show whether it can balance strategic imperatives with its identity as a pluralist democracy (Lidarev 2025).

Rather than focusing only on military, border, sovereignty, and legal issues, India and China should seek to reduce tensions through cooperation on culture and the environment. They could engage on issues such as Tibetan cultural preservation, religious freedom, and the shared management of Himalayan water resources. Shared concerns of this kind could become the basis for trust-building. This would not resolve all disputes,

but it would create a modest yet meaningful path toward improved relations.

India's Tibet policy has several important purposes. First, its strategy of ambiguity, once useful, is becoming less effective as China's influence expands. Second, traditional trust-building methods with China need revision. Third, the human rights dimension of Tibet makes the issue internationally significant, which complicates India's diplomacy. Fourth, the eventual succession of the Dalai Lama will be a critical turning point that will test India's ability to balance practical interests with democratic values. This will affect India's domestic credibility as well as its international standing.

Ultimately, Tibet shows that material power alone cannot secure stability along the Himalayan frontier. Narratives, legitimacy, and identity matter just as much. Policy frameworks that combine border security with cultural diplomacy, religious freedom, and ecological cooperation are more likely to mitigate conflict. Durable stability will require both countries to acknowledge competing visions of sovereignty and legitimacy, not merely contested territory. A genuine diplomatic reset would require India and China to negotiate these dimensions and move toward a more durable basis for trust and coexistence.

Conclusion

Differences over Tibet and the question of boundary demarcation have shaped disputes over sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity from the Simla Convention of 1914 to the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and into the present. In Chinese discourse, Tibet is securitised as a core interest that is inseparable and non-negotiable. India's policy of strategic ambiguity has accepted Chinese sovereignty over Tibet while continuing to host the Dalai Lama and the exile community. The political consequences are visible in Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020. These confrontations show that Tibet remains a historical issue shaping border disputes, military rivalry, and strategic caution.

Beyond bilateral relations, Tibet carries symbolic weight in global debates about human rights and cultural survival. Western criticism of Tibet strengthens Beijing's suspicion of external interference in its internal affairs. At the same time, the impending succession of the Dalai Lama highlights Tibet's identity dimension and places India at the intersection of religious freedom, cultural preservation, and strategic competition.

Tibet should not be reduced to a zero-sum territorial contest. Its multiple dimensions—geography, culture, and identity—must be taken into account. India should move beyond passive ambiguity by supporting Tibetan cultural

and religious autonomy within the PRC while refraining from commenting on the Dalai Lama's succession process. It should also recognise Chinese sensitivities while remaining faithful to its own pluralist commitments. CBMs should evolve into cultural exchange, ecological cooperation, and dialogue on border development rather than focusing only on troop movement.

Meanwhile, the Tibetan diaspora should be encouraged to contribute through cultural diplomacy, academic exchange, and ecological initiatives that treat Tibet as a shared civilisational resource rather than as a political wedge. Long-term stability will depend on a constructivist shift that recognises Tibet as more than contested territory. India and China can desecuritise Tibet by integrating cultural preservation, religious freedom, and ecological cooperation into policy dialogue. As China's political and economic power continues to grow, Tibet is likely to remain a persistent trigger of mistrust unless both countries recalibrate their approach.

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From Pilgrimage Routes to Political Borders: Monasteries and the Transformation of Indo- Tibetan Trade Networks

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical and contemporary role of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in shaping trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange across the Indo-Tibetan borderlands. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Dharamshala and archival insights from Himalayan trade histories, it explores how monasteries once served as vital nodes in a trans-Himalayan economic network linking merchants, pilgrims, and political emissaries along what has often been described as the “Buddhist Silk Road.” Historically, monasteries were not only centers of spiritual learning but also mediators of commerce, offering safe passage, legitimizing trade, and providing storage facilities for caravans traveling between India and Tibet. Texts, relics, salt, wool, herbal medicine, and ritual items circulated along these routes, embedding spiritual economies within material exchange. Drawing on Petech, Giersch, and McKay, the paper shows how these flows were integral to the region’s cultural geography. Since

China's annexation of Tibet and the closure of traditional trade routes, the role of monasteries has changed significantly. Through international donations, ethical gift economies, and Buddhist tourism, Tibetan refugee monasteries in present-day Dharamshala continue to uphold this tradition in modified forms. In the face of shifting geopolitical borders, these practices symbolically reassert historical ties between Tibet and India and support economic life in exile. The paper offers a nuanced account of Indo-Tibetan relations, where trade, religion, and memory intersect, by reconsidering monasteries as cultural and economic intermediaries. It argues that monasteries should be seen as active participants in both historical trade and modern border politics.

Keywords: Tibet, trade, Silk Route, monasteries, Buddhism, India.

Introduction

The Indo-Tibetan borderlands have historically functioned as vibrant cultural, religious, and economic hubs shaped by the constant movement of traders, pilgrims, and monastic actors. With their high-altitude deserts, mountain passes, and river valleys, these regions were far from peripheral; they served as vital conduits for cross-border communication. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were located within these regions and were essential to maintaining transregional connectivity. They served as nodes of authority, bridging the local and the

translocal, the secular and the sacred, and acting as more than places of spiritual instruction. Through ceremonial activity, governance, and economic facilitation, monasteries helped create a distinctive Buddhist political economy that shaped trade and diplomacy across the Himalayas.

Monasteries such as Sakya in Tibet and Tabo in Spiti served as spiritual and logistical hubs along what has been called the “Buddhist Silk Road” from the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. Merchants deposited goods and paid taxes, pilgrims sought blessings and guidance, and traveling lamas carried teachings and artifacts across the region. The monastery’s institutional presence, which combined material infrastructure with spiritual legitimacy, was inseparable from these flows of people, goods, and ideas. Monastic power derived not only from doctrinal status but also from practical roles as financiers, landlords, and arbitrators. Their enduring significance in the Himalayan world lay in their capacity to combine governance with ethics, wealth with virtue, and commerce with karma.

These trans-Himalayan networks underwent a dramatic reorganization in the twentieth century. Centuries-old systems of religious, economic, and territorial negotiation were disrupted by China’s annexation of Tibet in 1950, the 1959 uprising, and the Dalai Lama’s exile. Traditional trade routes were closed or militarized, monks were displaced, and

monasteries were destroyed. In response, exiled monastic communities, especially in India, undertook an impressive process of institutional reconstruction. New centers of Tibetan religious and cultural life emerged in places such as Dharamshala, where monasteries adapted to changing political conditions through new symbolic and economic forms of labor, including digital ritual services, tourism, and transnational philanthropy. This essay examines the transformation of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries from hubs of premodern governance and trade into institutions of moral diplomacy and cultural resilience. It draws on historical writings, archival materials, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Dharamshala between January and June 2022. Rethinking the monastery as a site where religion, economy, and geopolitics converge requires tracing its evolving roles, from mediating material flows to serving as a steward of memory and resistance.

Monastic political economy

Tibetan Buddhist monasteries played a central role in the political economy of the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, especially from the tenth century onward. Situated along major trade and pilgrimage routes, these monasteries served both as long-distance commercial hubs and as places of worship. Caravans traveling between Lhasa, Purang, Ladakh, and the Indian plains often stopped at monasteries such as Tabo, Sakya,

and Tashilhunpo to seek shelter, pay levies, store goods, and receive ritual blessings. In this way, monasteries operated as caravanserais and financial intermediaries, providing material support and cosmological protection for merchants. Their entanglement with trade and religious legitimacy enabled them to accumulate wealth, manage landholdings, and exercise judicial authority over mobile and settled populations (Giersch 2006, 72–74).

Monasteries were deeply embedded in what scholars describe as moral economies, systems of exchange governed by religious ethics, social trust, and karmic obligation. In these settings, trade was not purely transactional but ritualized and embedded in spiritual practice. Merchants were expected to offer *dāna*, or donations, to monasteries in exchange for prayers, blessings, and ritual protection. Monasteries, in turn, offered safe lodging, mediation services, and propitiatory rituals to ensure commercial success. Such exchanges were governed by Buddhist principles of merit-making (*puṇya*), non-harm (*ahiṃsā*), and right livelihood (*samyag-ājīva*), blurring the boundary between economic activity and religious duty (Gyatso 2015, 224–26).

In addition to their ritual and spiritual functions, monasteries carried out sophisticated financial roles resembling early banking institutions. They accumulated wealth through land grants, donations, and taxes collected in kind, then reinvested

these resources in local economies. Grain banks managed by monasteries lent food and seed to villagers, while goods such as salt, wool, and butter were stored in monastic vaults for redistribution during festivals or lean seasons. Some monasteries extended credit to traders or provided secure storage during the winter months. These transactions were carefully recorded in monastic ledgers and regulations, including the *bca' yig*, or monastic codes, which outlined procedures for treasurers, debt management, and merit-based investment strategies (Jansen 2018, 141–45).

Monasteries also exercised juridical and administrative authority, often functioning as *de facto* courts and local governments. Monastic leaders in western Tibet, Ladakh, and Spiti resolved land disputes, enforced trade contracts, and levied ritual fines. Their rulings were respected not only because of scriptural knowledge but because they embodied moral authority grounded in Buddhist ethics and communal trust. This legitimacy was reinforced through ritual oaths and public ceremonies that bound disputing parties to karmic consequences. As Petech notes in his study of Ladakh, lamas were often more trusted than lay officials and were indispensable in maintaining regional order, especially in frontier zones where state institutions were weak or absent (Petech 1972, 112–14).

The integration of monasteries into economic and political life was not unique to Tibet. Similar roles were played by Buddhist institutions elsewhere in Asia, including the Hindu-Buddhist temple complexes of South India and the “inexhaustible treasuries” (*wujinzang*) of medieval China. In such systems, religious institutions managed endowments, extended credit, and financed public works while accruing spiritual merit for the institution and its patrons. In Tibet, this spiritual-economy dynamic was reinforced by pilgrimage networks and relic circulation, which brought additional goods, donations, and prestige to major monasteries. As Diemberger argues, Tibetan monasteries institutionalized a dual logic of sacred accumulation and ritual redistribution, enabling their durability across political transitions and environmental uncertainty (Diemberger 2007, 83–86). These practices formed the basis of the moral economies later adapted and transformed in exile.

Colonial Disruption

The arrival of colonial and imperial powers in the Himalayas during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries profoundly transformed the spatial and political logic of Indo-Tibetan interaction. British colonial interests, shaped by the Great Game rivalry with Russia, sought strategic control over frontier zones in northern India, including Ladakh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. Through mapping, treaties, and administrative restructuring, the British imposed a fixed, linear conception

of borders on a region that had historically operated through porous sovereignties and ritual geographies. Customs houses, trade regulations, and the demarcation of borders through the Simla Convention of 1914 systematically bypassed monastic authority and eroded monasteries' integrative role in regional economy and diplomacy (McKay 2003, 97–100).

While British colonialism restructured the Indian Himalayan frontiers, the Qing Empire attempted to consolidate symbolic sovereignty over central Tibet through different means. Rather than direct territorial control, the Qing exerted influence by stationing Ambans in Lhasa and occasionally intervening in monastic succession and taxation. Qing authorities recognized the strategic and spiritual power of large monasteries, especially Gelugpa institutions, and often sought to co-opt them through imperial patronage. Yet these efforts introduced tensions between centralization and local autonomy. Monasteries that had long functioned as independent or regionally anchored authorities now faced competing claims from distant state centers, claims that redefined them from autonomous economic actors into subjects of imperial scrutiny (Petech 1990, 51–54).

One of the most enduring effects of British and Qing interventions was the transformation of space through cartography, census, and survey. The British-led Great Trigonometrical Survey and related mapping projects rendered

Himalayan terrain into a grid of measurable coordinates, replacing fluid religious landscapes with rationalized political boundaries. Sacred trails that connected monasteries, trade routes, and pilgrimage sites were reclassified as frontiers and borders. As Scott argues, such state simplifications sought to make complex societies legible to bureaucratic administration, erasing the layered cosmological significance of space that had defined the region for centuries (Scott 2009, 43–49). The redefinition of land as property, borders as security lines, and mobility as a threat directly undermined monasteries' ritual authority and logistical centrality.

The disruption intensified after the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the Dalai Lama's flight in 1959. The annexation marked a geopolitical shift and a violent rupture in the cultural and religious systems that had sustained the Tibetan plateau for centuries. Thousands of monasteries were destroyed or desecrated during the Cultural Revolution, and the trade networks linking Lhasa to Leh, Tabo to Purang, and other nodes of the Buddhist world were abruptly severed. The border between India and Tibet transformed from a porous landscape of spiritual and commercial exchange into a militarized frontier policed by nation-states. With the closure of trade routes and the criminalization of cross-border movement, monastic economies collapsed, cutting off both material sustenance and ritual circulation. As Shakya notes, this period witnessed the erasure of the monastery not just as

a building but as a sovereign institution within Tibetan society (Shakya 1999, 225–30).

Despite this violent dislocation, Tibetan monasteries were not merely passive victims of geopolitical transformation. In the wake of destruction and exile, many institutions reimagined their purpose and survival strategies. Particularly in India, Nepal, and Bhutan, displaced monks, nuns, and lay supporters undertook the difficult task of rebuilding religious sites and systems of ritual, governance, and education. This moment marked a shift from embeddedness in local trade toward engagement with global support circuits. As Barnett argues, monasteries in exile became hybrid institutions—temples, schools, museums, and NGOs simultaneously—reconfiguring their authority to suit new political and economic realities (Barnett 2001, 276). The collapse of territorial and economic sovereignty thus catalyzed a reorientation toward symbolic sovereignty, where memory, ritual continuity, and transnational legitimacy became central to monastic resilience.

Rebuilding in exile

After the 1959 Tibetan uprising and the Dalai Lama's flight to India, monastic communities began a process of reconstitution in exile that was both material and symbolic. With support from the Indian government and international Buddhist organizations, refugee monks established new monasteries in Dharamshala, Bylakuppe, Sarnath, and Dehradun. These sites

became vital centers for preserving and transmitting Tibetan religious heritage. In Dharamshala, Namgyal Monastery, the personal monastery of the Dalai Lama, was reestablished alongside major institutions such as Gyuto Tantric Monastery and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. These centers preserved religious teachings and ritual practices while also serving as platforms for cultural diplomacy, community education, and refugee administration (Barnett 2001, 280–82).

The monastic economy in exile shifted from dependence on agrarian surplus and regional trade to a model grounded in transnational patronage, ethical gift economies, and global Buddhist networks. Without access to caravan commerce or state-backed land grants, monasteries turned to international donors, NGOs, and diaspora communities for support. Sponsorship programs such as “adopt a monk” or “sponsor a prayer” became common, with donations funding food, robes, healthcare, and monastic education (Jansen 2018, 91–95; Lopez 1998; Tibetan Nuns Project 2024; Sera Je Monastic University 2024). These practices were not simply adaptations; they reflected continuity with older merit-based giving systems reinterpreted in the context of neoliberal humanitarianism.

As McLagan observes, Tibetan monasteries in exile became adept at navigating the global field of cultural activism and philanthropy, projecting authenticity and urgency to mobilize support (McLagan 2002, 97). This transformation required

new institutional capacities. Monasteries had to train monks in ritual, philosophy, administration, English communication, and grant writing. Senior monks began managing bank accounts, preparing reports for foreign donors, and liaising with international organizations. The monastery thus evolved into a bureaucratic-religious hybrid, preserving ancient lineages while adopting modern organizational forms. These changes echoed earlier monastic governance in premodern Tibet, where treasurers and abbots maintained detailed ledgers and enforced financial codes outlined in *bca' yig*. As Jansen shows, monasteries historically maintained rigorous systems of accountability, which have been reactivated and recontextualized in exile to meet new ethical and operational demands (Jansen 2018, 110–14).

Monasteries in exile also reterritorialized sacred space through architecture, ritual, and memory. In Dharamshala and elsewhere, rebuilt monasteries consciously reproduced Tibetan layouts and aesthetics, including assembly halls, debate courtyards, murals, and statues. These spatial reproductions were more than architectural choices; they were acts of mnemonic reinscription designed to sustain continuity in conditions of dislocation. Through festivals such as Monlam Chenmo, mask dances (*cham*), and scholastic debates, these institutions performed sovereignty and sacred order in exile. Such practices resemble what Navaro-Yashin calls “affective spaces,” where material reconstruction becomes a means

of emotional and political reattachment to a lost homeland (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 6).

Beyond their internal community functions, monasteries emerged as key actors in soft diplomacy and cultural representation. Monks began traveling internationally to give teachings, conduct rituals, and participate in interfaith and human rights forums. These were not only religious events but strategic acts of visibility, staging Tibetan identity for global audiences sympathetic to the Tibetan cause. Through publications, media outreach, and public prayers for peace, monasteries articulated a nonviolent response to occupation and exile. They positioned themselves as guardians of a threatened civilization and moral voices in global discourses on compassion, environment, and human rights. As Barnett notes, these forms of cultural diplomacy transformed monasteries into transnational platforms of resistance operating through ethical persuasion rather than political confrontation (Barnett 2001, 284–85).

Memory and Resistance

In exile, Tibetan monasteries have become living archives: spaces where memory is preserved, performed, and transmitted through embodied religious practice. Faced with the loss of homeland and territorial sovereignty, monastic institutions have cultivated ritual continuity as a mode of resistance. Daily chanting, debate, masked dance, and calendrical festivals

enact a performative memory that sustains Tibetan identity across generations. These practices do more than recall the past; they create an affective space in which displacement is transformed into moral resilience. As Navaro-Yashin suggests, such “affective ruins” do not merely symbolize loss but generate the emotional bonds that shape new political and cultural subjectivities (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 7).

Language and education have been central to these mnemonic practices. Monastic institutions in exile have invested heavily in preserving classical Tibetan language, canonical texts, and scholastic traditions. Monastic schools teach Buddhist logic, ethics, Tibetan grammar, poetics, and historiography, ensuring that students internalize the intellectual frameworks sustaining Tibetan civilization. Institutions such as the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala function as counter-archives, collecting manuscripts, oral histories, and visual records documenting the continuity of Tibetan cultural life despite geopolitical rupture. Stoler argues that archives are not neutral repositories but political technologies through which societies construct authority, legitimacy, and futurity (Stoler 2011, 4). Tibetan monastic archives operate in this way, producing epistemic resistance against state-led historical erasure.

These educational and archival efforts are not confined within the monastery; they extend outward through publications,

lectures, and international outreach. Many monasteries have established multilingual publishing houses that translate Tibetan scriptures, commentaries, and biographies into English, Hindi, Chinese, and European languages. Through these texts, monasteries assert narrative sovereignty over Tibetan history and identity, countering dominant geopolitical framings of Tibet as peripheral or backward. Translation becomes a political tool that opens Tibetan thought to global audiences while affirming its philosophical depth and contemporary relevance. Diemberger notes that such efforts are part of a broader cultural survival strategy in which memory and textuality serve both religious and diplomatic ends (Diemberger 2007, 90).

Nonviolent resistance is also sustained through pedagogy and performance. Monasteries resist cultural erasure by fostering continuity in ritual and intellectual life. They refuse to dissolve into a generic refugee identity or assimilate fully into dominant national cultures. Instead, they assert a different kind of sovereignty grounded in historical depth, spiritual authority, and ethical discipline. As Graeber argues, power can be exercised through the refusal to abandon moral practice in the face of structural upheaval (Graeber 2001, 254–57). Tibetan monastic rituals and practices of remembrance exemplify this form of resistance.

The resulting combination of memory, ritual, and diplomacy has given Tibetan monasticism a prominent international presence. Tibetan monasteries have reached far beyond the Himalayan plateau through international conferences on nonviolence and prayer ceremonies for world peace. In doing so, they have become both contributors to global ethical discourse and custodians of a tradition under threat. Their dual function as active participants in contemporary moral debates and preservers of endangered cultural heritage has secured them a distinctive place in the global imagination. McLagan argues that Tibetan monasticism in exile exemplifies “spectacles of difference” that harness cultural visibility as soft power, bridging tradition and modernity, local devotion and international advocacy (McLagan 2002, 102–4).

Conclusion

Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have long been central to the socio-economic, political, and spiritual life of the Indo-Tibetan region. As this paper has shown, their historical role extended far beyond religious instruction. They were institutions of governance, financial administration, and transregional mediation. In the premodern era, they facilitated commerce, resolved disputes, stored wealth, and sanctified trade through ritual legitimacy and karmic authority. Their influence derived from a distinctive synthesis of ethical economy, religious sovereignty, and localized governance (Petech 1972; Giersch 2006).

The disruptions caused by colonial cartography and Chinese annexation shattered these integrated systems. With the closure of trans-Himalayan trade and the destruction of sacred institutions, monasteries lost their territorial and economic base. Yet exile did not render them obsolete. Instead, Tibetan monastic communities reconstituted themselves through global networks, adapting their organizational forms to include donor outreach, NGO partnerships, and cultural diplomacy. In this transformation, they retained their ethical core while expanding their political and economic agency in new transnational configurations (Barnett 2001; McLagan 2002).

In exile, monasteries have become not only places of worship and learning but also sites of cultural memory, affective sovereignty, and nonviolent resistance. Through ritual, education, translation, and digital presence, they project a Tibetan identity that is rooted in lineage yet engaged with the world. Their refusal to disappear, and their refusal to allow exile to become erasure, exemplify what Graeber describes as resistance through continuity: the quiet power of institutions that endure by adapting without capitulating (Graeber 2001). These institutions continue to challenge dominant narratives of Tibet as politically passive or economically marginal. Instead, they assert themselves as active participants in shaping the moral and political economy of the Tibetan world, historically and today. As Stoler reminds us, institutions of memory are

also institutions of authority; in preserving the past, Tibetan monasteries claim a right to the future (Stoler 2011).

To understand monasteries only as religious relics is to miss their dynamism. They are moral economies, political actors, transnational diplomats, and custodians of endangered knowledge. Their continued relevance lies not only in what they remember but in what they continue to imagine. In a fractured world, they offer a vision of resilience forged through faith, ritual, and the enduring pursuit of ethical life.

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Men-Tse-Khang Pills, Himalayan Herbs and the Potentiality of Sowa Rigpa Medical System

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Abstract

This study draws its insights from a series of ethnographic fieldwork studies. This paper aims to explore the past, present, and future of this shared medical legacy. While India's soft power legacy has long drawn upon its association with Buddhism, recent cultural diplomacy has included interventions in heritage protection. In this context, Sowa Rigpa emerges as an overlooked yet potent soft power medium. This paper makes a case for Sowa Rigpa, rooted in Buddhist philosophy, intertwined with India's Himalayan cultures, and institutionally supported since 1960, recognized in India in 2010. I aim to make a case, drawing from my doctoral research, to demonstrate cultural and intellectual ties between India (Western Himalayas) and Tibet. Drawing on historical policy analysis and contemporary ethnographic research, this paper maps the evolving place of Sowa Rigpa in India from 1960 to the present. I argue for an urgent need to theorize an Indo-Tibetan Sowa Rigpa sensibility, which recognizes it not merely as a living nexus of Buddhist legacy, medicinal materiality, and cross-border cultural ties. This paper makes

room for such discussions to emerge and to question what is at stake when Sowa Rigpa is viewed not only as a medical system but as a living, dynamic nexus that connects knowledge traditions and Buddhist legacy across Himalayan ranges and remote circuits within.

Introduction

“Sowa Rigpa originates from the Tibetan Plateau, our forefathers travelled freely to Tibet and learned the nuances of this medical system. Most of them became respected Amchi and emerged as the only health resource in remote Himalayan valleys; it is a case of shared legacy, innovation, and wisdom. Unfortunately, now, it is emerging as a case of identity politics and medicine control.”

(Amchi Thupten Tharpe 2023)

Building on this ethnographic insight, this paper aims to explore the past, present, and future of this shared medical legacy. While India’s soft power legacy has long drawn upon its association with Buddhism, recent cultural diplomacy has included interventions in heritage protection. In this context, Sowa Rigpa emerges as an overlooked yet potent soft power medium. This paper makes a case for Sowa Rigpa, rooted in Buddhist philosophy, intertwined with India’s Himalayan cultures, and institutionally supported since 1960, recognized

in India in 2010. I aim to make a case, drawing from my doctoral research, to demonstrate cultural and intellectual ties between India (Western Himalayas) and Tibet. Drawing on historical policy analysis and contemporary ethnographic research, this paper maps the evolving place of Sowa Rigpa in India from 1960 to the present. I argue for an urgent need to theorize an Indo-Tibetan Sowa Rigpa sensibility, which recognizes it not merely as a living nexus of Buddhist legacy, medicinal materiality, and cross-border cultural ties. This paper makes room for such discussions to emerge and to question what is at stake when Sowa Rigpa is viewed not only as a medical system but a living, dynamic nexus that connects knowledge traditions and Buddhist legacy across Himalayan ranges and remote circuits within.

A Sowa Rigpa Sensibility

Sowa Rigpa is most often translated as “science of healing” (Adams, Schrempf, and Craig 2013, 17; Hofer 2017, 23; Craig 2012, 29), which lends itself to a layered meaning related to curing, nourishment, repairing, or health in general. It brings together art, science, acquired and innovative skills that serve the goal of bringing internal and external balance to the body, which implies a state of wellbeing and health. In Tibetan, Rigpa refers to the most scholarly field of study pursued primarily in monastic settings and does not make stark distinctions between medicine and religious studies. A

rudimentary understanding of the system is related to the “five cosmo-physical elements” (jungwa nga) of wind (lung), earth (sa), water (chu), and space (namkha) concerning the three energies or humors of wind (lung), bile (tripa), and phlegm (peken) (Hofer 2017, 23). A healthy body has these elements in perfect harmony, while an imbalance is the reason for disease and illness. Treatment and medical intervention not only occur through medicines but also through dietary and external therapies. Along with ritual practices and mantra recitation, prevention through amulets and so on is also important (Czaja 2020; Craig and Gerke 2016). Likewise, there is an entire ecosystem of practices and theoretical paradigms that are learned and enacted to ensure healing. It is within these constellations of practices that the systematic study of Sowa Rigpa occurs; not divorced from cosmological-religious and experienced worlds.

The social actors involved in the enactment of healing practices and practitioners of the system are popularly known as Amchi. Various other terms such as menpa, literally the one with the medicine or doctor; mopa, a diviner specializing in ritual diagnosis and healing; lhapa, an oracle or spirit medium; and ngangpa, a tantric practitioner, all play important parts in healing of various kinds. Although Amchi is a loan word from Mongolian, they are the primary practitioners of Sowa Rigpa medical knowledge and practices and are most often the primary health resource in remote Himalayan regions.

It is not necessary that an Amchi is also a lhapa, but some, at least in my ethnographic field, were both divine healers and local doctors who procure, produce, and recommend medicine based on the canonical texts of rGyud-bZhi. Sowa Rigpa has served as the only historical health resource in states and regions such as Ladakh, Zaskar, Lahaul, Spiti, Sikkim, and the Monpa areas of Arunachal Pradesh (Pordié and Kloos 2022, 7), while variations of this system continue to be popular and practiced in countries like Nepal, Bhutan, parts of Russia, and Mongolia. Since the Tibetan diaspora, Sowa Rigpa has emerged as a global system, categorized under the umbrella of traditional or alternative medicine. Yet these constellations that make up the system and its practitioners serve as a miniscule introduction to a subject matter that has existed since the 12th century in recorded Tibetan history. What has been outlined here constitutes merely a preliminary sketch, far from exhausting the breadth and intricacy of Sowa Rigpa. This brief contouring only scratches the surface of a discipline as vast and varied as the lands and people it has touched and continues to do so. The intent of this brief is to give a preliminary explanation but also to demarcate the perimeter that this essay and its arguments will build upon.

Academic scholarship around Sowa Rigpa can be sorted through either historical analysis that presumes the seamless intertwining of science and religion or the cultural medical anthropology pursuit of understanding the system in its

varied locales. Furthermore, an anthropological approach also brings in contextually informed lived experiences of Sowa Rigpa practitioners and monastic and lay populations, further adding layered meanings. Bringing the discourse from historical paradigms to the contemporary world, in 2010 the government of India legally recognized it as an ancient Indian medical system, cementing the idea of its shared roots with India. This recognition brought into the forefront two significant aspects of Sowa Rigpa: first, the legal recognition of the Indo-Tibetan healing system as part of its alternative, traditional, and pluralistic landscape; and second, recognizing the efforts of exile Tibetans to rebuild medical institutions and transmit and conserve traditional knowledge, while also, as a byproduct, highlighting the existence and medical role Indian Himalayan practitioners have played at the local and national level. This is the entry point of this article: since the recognition of Sowa Rigpa in India, what kinds of issues and contestations have emerged, and what lessons can we learn from this ongoing transformation and the dynamics of the Sowa Rigpa system and its practitioners? The practitioners of Sowa Rigpa can be divided into two subgroups: a) institutionally trained practitioners who are trained in various branches of Men-Tse-Khang institutes nationally, and b) non-institutional, lineage-based trained practitioners, often found in remote regions of Ladakh, Himachal, and the Northeast of India; both exist as distant cousins. This division is only

for analytical purposes, and ground reality provides evidence for a mix and match of both subgroups. Since the Tibetan exile, many Amchi aspirants from the Indian Himalayas have been trained with the exile population, and institutes such as Men-Tse-Khang have provided necessary training and exposure. Similarly, a bunch of institutionally trained Amchi also seek medicine making and other kinds of tutelage from lineage Amchi. Both subgroups have for centuries existed in a symbiotic relationship.

Yet, this symbiosis is increasingly getting diluted due to regional and identity politics. Its evidence was observed during my doctoral fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh from 2019 onwards. To detangle such regional and consequential complexities is a shared project among historians, medical and cultural anthropologists, philosophers, and scholars of religion.

Among the branches of the Sowa Rigpa system, practice, and practitioners, this article reiterates the usage of Sowa Rigpa sensibility. A Sowa Rigpa sensibility (Adams et al. 2013, 15) considers the problem of encountering medicine between science and religion but also paves the way for scholarly engagements that map the multidirectional flow of ideas and practices across medical worlds. Instead of habitually turning to biomedicine as the normative ideal or the “other,” and all traditional or alternative medical practices in competition with it, let us begin with Sowa Rigpa as a system.

Once we reflect on the Tibetan words and their etymological meaning, one finds even the translation to be multilayered. When we reflect on the social worlds of its practitioners and intra-regional variability, the ground we stand on is further complicated. When we reflect on the history of Sowa Rigpa and its shared, albeit distinct, ethnographic contexts, another layer of complexities is added. A Sowa Rigpa sensibility helps us attune our scholarly eyes and minds to not chase the mirage of objectivity and homogeneity but to create more room for variation and nuanced understanding of Sowa Rigpa's social ecologies (Craig 2012). It draws enhanced attention to questions of center, periphery, and marginality within Sowa Rigpa, while also making attempts to attune variabilities to national and global realities. This article makes use of one such trope and investigates the interplay of two ideas: 1) What are the differences in the ways Amchi are recognized as health professionals? and 2) How can the professionalization of Amchi and intra-regional variations of the Sowa Rigpa system contribute to India's soft power strategy?

Sowa Rigpa as a Transnational Cultural Entity

Men-Tse-Khang educates the highest number of Sowa Rigpa professionals and has a network of 56 clinics across India, yet the practice of these medical professionals is not limited to India. Trained professionals frequently visit America, Europe, Japan, and other continents to teach, diagnose, and create

newer centers; either on invitation of Tibetan groups settled in various parts of the world or of other dignitaries and friends of Tibet, decades of such work have led to plenty of discussions, presentations and scholarship about various facets of this transnational medical system. Few celebrated practitioners such as Dr. Nida Chenagtsang has numerous articles and books on Sowa Rigpa and is also the founding member and medical director of Sorig Khang International; he also founded and runs Pure Land Farms, which is a center for Tibetan medicine, meditation, and rejuvenation in Los Angeles, California, while traversing and training students in over forty countries around the world. Similarly, Lobsang Sokstang (Sokstang & Milliard, 2013) discusses the international character of Sowa Rigpa practice and the ways in which inherent adaptability and room for innovation facilitate practitioners to meet various health needs of humans across the world. There are many more celebrated and reputed practitioners as well as teachers across the world, who cannot be included here for lack of space. However, the idea is to orient ourselves towards the transnational character of this medical system, which has a robust ethical dimension that facilitates this movement. We must consider that it is not only the character of the Tibetan diaspora and exiled Tibetans settling in different parts of the world that lends Sowa Rigpa its transnational characteristic, but also Sowa Rigpa's ethical apparatus. Seeped in Buddhist and humanistic ethics, explanatory commentaries on Sowa

Rigpa regard the primary objective of the medical system and the practitioner to be dedicated towards alleviating the suffering of mankind, of which disease and illness is a part (Gyatso, translation Kilty 2010).

Taking forward a similar cue, Kloos (2012) looks at the Sowa Rigpa medical system and global health, its evolving relationship with global health interventions, and the emergence of a transnational pharmaceutical industry. The author, having worked extensively on Sowa Rigpa transnationally and conducted the first of its kind ethnographic investigation on Men-Tse-Khang in 2006, builds on the idea of “humanitarianism from below” and describes how Tibetan refugees, themselves stateless, leverage the Sowa Rigpa system to “help the world,” mirroring global health logics and a discourse from a subaltern position. He also highlights the industrialization of the medical system in China that aligns with global health needs and transnational herbal medicinal industries. The paper is useful to map the gradual reorientation of Sowa Rigpa’s focus on global health agendas since the 1980s, driven by humanitarian, capitalist market logic and a focus on the prevention of chronic diseases and mental health. Kloos emphasizes the need for critical engagement with this complex relationship to ensure that both global outreach and local health needs are met. Taking an inspirational cue from Kloos’s work, this paper aims to look at where India stands in the grand scheme of things and how it is leveraging Sowa

Rigpa. Having established Sowa Rigpa as a transnational system, we see that different countries engage with the system in diverse ways, while China, as Kloos points out, is driven by a capitalist market logic and Tibetans in exile are oriented to uphold the humanitarian logic.

Although there is more historical and anthropological scholarship that focuses on different regions of Tibet (Craig, 2012; Hofer, 2017), I will focus briefly on the status of Sowa Rigpa and the ways in which it partakes in the idea of transnational cultural heritage in other parts of Asia for now. Although many studies are also emerging around the existence, emergence, and development of the Sowa Rigpa system in Europe, America, and Canada, I will deliberately refrain from those studies for lack of space and focus on Sowa Rigpa within Asia. Asiatic terrain is geopolitical, and Sowa Rigpa has been appropriated in nations such as China, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Russia, and Mongolia in diverse ways, each correlating its own cultural heritage to the traditional Buddhist timeline. Before we dwell on the Indian timeline, following is a brief overview of Sowa Rigpa in other countries. Kloos (2006, 2008, 2012, 2022) already provides useful insight into how Tibet (occupied by China) and Tibetans in exile utilize Sowa Rigpa in transnational contexts. Martin Saxer (2010, Adams et al., pp. 70–91) looks at Sowa Rigpa and Russian modernities; he argues that the history of this medical system is closely linked to the history of Buddhism in Russia.

Russia, formerly the Soviet Union, had primary regions where Buddhism made its foothold and was practiced in regions such as the Kalmyk Republic, Tuvianian Republic, and Buryatia. At the beginning of the 18th century, Buddhism began to penetrate the diverse regions of Russia, and monks from Tibet and Mongolia began to travel to these places, followed by years of building monasteries and translating medical texts and canons. It was in 1869 that monastic dignitaries applied for Sowa Rigpa medical knowledge and teachers to be officially recognized. In 1898, another attempt was made, but it was the publication of *On the Medical Sciences of Tibet*, written by Badmayev, that drew attention to institutionalized medicine from Tibet. The book, as Saxer discusses, made the elimination of superstition and ignorance pivotal in pursuits of medical science, which Sowa Rigpa displayed. In 1922, a Buddhist conference led to a resurfacing of the issue of the legality of Sowa Rigpa, and a resolution was passed to professionalize the education and practice of Amchi in Russia. This modernization of Sowa Rigpa and its trajectory in Russia entailed not directly harnessing the relations between Tibet and Russia, but a strong stimulus towards a particular kind of modernity based essentially on the elimination of ignorance and superstition. In Russia, Sowa Rigpa is not recognized in all regions but enjoys government support and legal status under regional health systems; it functions as a tool of cultural revival and Buddhist identity-building, especially post-socialism,

which in the modern world is powered through international collaborations with Tibet and India. It would be worthwhile for researchers to dwell further into such investigations in the future. For now, let us briefly look at the status of Sowa Rigpa in Bhutan. Based on personal correspondence with Barbara Gerke and team members from the Pandemic Narratives project, namely Dendup Chopel and Yeshe Samdrup, the status of Sowa Rigpa in Bhutan enjoys legitimacy and is highly sought after. It is considered one of the native medical systems, and practitioners of Sowa Rigpa are mostly salaried and at par with other doctors.

Gerke, who has more than 25 years of experience and publications on and around Sowa Rigpa, currently teaches at the Sowa Rigpa college in Thimphu, where Sowa Rigpa is taught in standardized form, it is state funded, and coexists with biomedical hospitals. Representing state-sponsored soft power and being part of the national happiness model and cultural diplomacy, it goes well with its image as a holistic kingdom balancing tradition and modernity. In Nepal, though, Sowa Rigpa is not formally institutionalized but is recognized under Nepal's Traditional and Complimentary Medicine framework. It exists in a semi-formal space and has a strong presence in Himalayan regions of Mustang, Dolpo, and Humla. Seinna Craig (2012) discusses at length her ethnographic findings from Lo Kunphen Amchi school and how the title reads in English and Nepali but not necessarily

Tibetan, downplaying the shared roots and “interconnected history between Mustang and centers of Sowa Rigpa in Lhasa, Dharamshala” (Craig 2012, 52); she also illuminates through her ethnography the struggle for legitimacy and recognition that her interlocutors in Nepal shared. Another article (Mundelius and Sprisevska, 2025) discusses transnational expertise and the creation of Sowa Rigpa supplements between South Asia and Europe. In personal correspondence with Patricia, she informs us of the semi-formal status of Sowa Rigpa and its practitioners, who enjoy greater legitimacy once they move their practice and expertise beyond Nepal. The process of innovating and adapting products to international markets involves substantial reinterpretation, which can be inferred both as a survival mechanism and as potentially harming the efficacy and reputation of Sowa Rigpa. Once again, instead of discussing these transnationally emerging issues at length in this paper, they are briefly introduced to inform the reader about the nature of Sowa Rigpa and its transnational yet diverse character in different nations, where it exists as cultural heritage and honors in varied ways the interconnected history of Buddhist ties and shared legacy; contributing to a new leaf in Sowa Rigpa sensibility. We will now refer once again to the issue at hand and look at Sowa Rigpa within India, bringing back the idea of two distant cousins introduced in the previous section.

Sowa Rigpa in India: Distant Cousins and Soft Power Potential

Having briefly reviewed the status of Sowa Rigpa and its modernization in Asia, we now turn to the crux of the matter by looking at Sowa Rigpa practice through the lens of Tibetan exile in India and the Indian Himalayas. My ethnographic work from 2015 to 2019 occurred in Dharamshala, based primarily on observation, while from 2019 onward I formally took multisited ethnography as a methodology for my doctoral project and shadowed a dozen Amchi from regions such as Kullu, Lahaul, Kinnaur, and Spiti. After years of working with many illustrious Sowa Rigpa practitioners and engaging with them through prior anthropological scholarship, empirical evidence of a shared relationality between Tibetan and Himalayan counterparts of Amchi and the Sowa Rigpa system became increasingly evident. Hence, my use of the term two distant cousins.

For example, a leading Amchi from Kaza, Spiti, Amchi Thupten Tharpe, trained under Amchi Lobsang Dolma Khangsar, a celebrated Amchi from Tibet. She now has private clinics run by her daughter, Amchi Tsewang Dolkar Khangsar, and her nephew in Dharamshala and New Delhi, frequently establishing her practice and clinic as a pan-national channel of exchange and learning. Another example on the practitioner's front is the Tibetan-trained Late Dr. Yeshe Dhonden, a

celebrated Padma Shri awardee and cancer specialist who served as one of the founding members of Men-Tse-Khang; his clinic continues to treat patients from across the globe.

Another celebrated Amchi from Lahaul, Amchi Sunder Singh, went to Chagpori in Tibet in the 1950s–1960s to obtain Sowa Rigpa knowledge. On his return, he established a school in Manali, which further trained at least four batches and more than forty Amchi from the Himalayan region. Recent studies (Gohain 2024; Pordie and Kloos 2022) reorient our gaze toward a localized network of Buddhist as well as Sowa Rigpa medical knowledge transmission that confronts the Buddhist epistemic complex and show how the two counterparts are essential to detangling center-periphery complexities and the role Tibetan-run institutions play in the conservation and transmission of historically shared knowledge. Based on my work and existing literature, though a few points of divergence stand out between Sowa Rigpa practice in Tibetan exile conditions and in the Indian Himalayas, these are useful as heuristic tools for a cross-sectional examination. This is not to say that these two are entirely distinct from one another, but that these differences are useful for investigation from a unifying intention while also honoring the differences. The exchanges occurring within localized forms of this medical practice provide further evidence of a unified field, primarily through shared textual sourcing in the treatise of the Four Tantras among them. Accommodating and encouraging

regional variations and innovations, while also displaying a dynamic temperament focused on context-based evidence and investigation, only enhances the efficacy of the system.

This enhancement, however, must not be one-sided, which is between Tibetan institutes and the institution of biomedical science, but should be multidirectional. Historically, that was the case, but claims to modern relevance have relegated the shared field temporarily to the back seat. Let us return to the divergences between the two distant cousins for a cross-sectional investigation. One is the set of Tibetan medical practitioners trained before and in exile conditions, usually through institutes such as Men-Tse-Khang, where since its inception in Dharamshala the strategies of standardization, scientization (EBM), and institutionalization of medical knowledge transmission and practice have been prioritized.⁸ The other cousin usually practices in remote village contexts and is not necessarily trained in an institute but through rGyupa, lineage-based transmission, learning the art, skill, and science of Sowa Rigpa either through grandfathers or uncles who have also received medical knowledge through patrilineal networks, apprenticeship-style practices, and a Buddhist Wang ceremony to solidify their practice. These Amchi often do not have a certificate or legal document to signify their training and qualifications, but they enjoy a certain intergenerational social capital within remote villages and valleys. The second divergence is regarding the secular notion of practice, while

Tibetan counterparts adhere to global standards rooted in notions of oneness of humanity that de-emphasize the religio-spiritual episteme of the medical practice. The Himalayan cousins, by contrast, view Sowa Rigpa knowledge and practice as deeply intertwined with Buddhist cosmology and spiritual practices. One can reassess this difference also on the basis of the idea that Buddhism is not a religion at all but a logically derived, rational, non-theistic framework and philosophical way of life.

However, these arguments can be discussed in another discourse. Coming back to the third divergence between the two cousins, the Tibetan counterparts adhere to Good Manufacturing Practices and produce increasingly standardized medicines through small-scale cottage industries located in Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and the Eastern Himalayas. The Himalayan cousins collect medicinal raw materials through sojourns to mountain tops and high passes to make their own medicines on a yearly basis. The Amchi(s) I worked with preferred to produce medicines in powder form, using manual labor and long hours to dry, grind, and formulate medicine, specifically avoiding machines to grind the materials. Sometimes they will procure medicines from Men-Tse-Khang stores but prefer raw material sourced from Amritsar or Delhi. Even the formulations used for medicines have intra-regional variations, which are either a result of years of mastery or the use of skills encouraged throughout the medical treatise

of Sowa Rigpa. These three divergences, extracted here for heuristic purposes based on years of ethnography, are not meant to contrast these two sets of ways of knowing and practice, but to make claims that these two distant cousins will always share a paradigmatic core. It is the skillful use of that shared paradigmatic core, rooted in precepts discussed in the opening section, that provides the medical practice with the transformative ability to exist in localized form yet be used as a means of soft power, at least in a country whose preamble is embedded in unity in diversity.

It is not the difference between these two cousins that I argue for. In fact, my argument through this paper is to reorient academic and political scholarship to provide evidence that Sowa Rigpa has always existed in intra-regional variations and that methods to develop and popularize this medical system should not emanate from difference. The claim is rooted in a Sowa Rigpa sensibility, where variations of practice must be used not as means of competition but as means of contribution, reconfiguring our gaze toward Amchi from both sets as a valuable health resource in both localized and global networks. Though China also has made claims to globally recognize Sowa Rigpa as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, its claims are rooted in a sense of unification and standardization that subverts regional, subaltern voices and practices. India can do things differently, although recognition from the UN as an Intangible Cultural Heritage does not serve

the purpose; instead, strengthening soft power entities is a far more beneficial route. Sowa Rigpa is a valuable medical system increasingly perceived as a system that reiterates the idea of holistic healing, balance, and well-being in the body and alternate forms of treatment in a medically pluralistic nation such as India. It is for reasons such as these, along with the shared history of traveling healers from India into Tibet and vice versa, that some Amchi in Spiti have also called it “Buddhist Ayurveda.” Through this paper, I want to add another dimension to this flourishing practice that foremost grants equal status to both institutional and non-institutional counterparts because both contribute in unique ways to the length and breadth of the medical system and its practice. Not only as an alternative to health-seeking junctures but also as the only health resource in remote Buddhist regions such as Lahaul and Spiti, they also participate in the knowledge preservation, dissemination, and preservation of herbal medical materials. Instead of patients and people choosing to either go to Men-Tse-Khang clinics in these regions or to a village Amchi, it would be beneficial if these two cousins could approach diseases and illness through a unified front. Men-Tse-Khang trainees could learn in greater detail about regional medicinal variations, raw materials, and nuances of materia medica and formulation processes, while village Amchi could gain from an objective, secular, and standardized form of practice, catering to the global as well as local. The idea

is not to let institutions subsume the medical lineages but to rethink newer ways to bring the distant cousins closer, which would enhance the idea of Sowa Rigpa as an emerging soft power entity in India.

Concluding Remarks

This paper was an attempt to foreground a relatively less explored angle in Sowa Rigpa and politics-policy scholarship. As an anthropologist, my work is informed by the lived experiences of my interlocutors and their embedded cultures. This paper is an attempt to translate those findings for a larger audience and provide an overview of Sowa Rigpa contestations and its practitioners from a multi-contextual, albeit political perspective. This paper opens room for further deliberations and invites the reader to think about alternate medical systems as contributions to transnational soft power discourse. This paper does not dwell in detail on the theoretical paradigms that support soft power discourse in international politics, but it does preliminary work in opening such discussions. It makes a contribution in transdisciplinary contexts where anthropological empirical knowledge can be used to inform and deliberate over political and policy-driven issues. By informing readers about the status of the Sowa Rigpa system and practitioners in India, an attempt is made to increase greater dialogue between its Tibetan and Himalayan counterparts. It also aims to bring their relationality to the

forefront and restore the symbiotic relationship that existed historically.

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Postmemory and Rehearsing the State: Tibetan Refugeehood and the Strategy of Identity Preservation

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Abstract

The historical context of the Tibetan refugees goes back to the suppression of the Lhasa uprising by the People's Liberation Army in March 1959, when His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama crossed into India with approximately eighty thousand Tibetans. This exodus led to the formation of what has been termed one of the most "successful," organised, and enduring refugee populations in the world. India, as the primary host country, provided settlements across Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, and Arunachal Pradesh, where successive generations of Tibetans have lived for over six decades now. India is home to about 75 percent of the global exile Tibetan population, with its cultural, political, and religious epicentre at Dharamsala (Subba 1990; Saklani 1984, 15). Subba (1990) and Saklani (1984) agree that Tibetans have, on the one hand, emerged as a model of good integration with the host population, while on the other they have retained a way of life still considered "ancestral" along

material, symbolic, and mnemonic registers. These three registers are not mutually exclusive; rather, they bleed into one another, activating a discourse that is at the heart of the Tibetan identity in exile.

Keywords: Tibet, statehood, post-memory, identity.

The question of identity is a vexed one. Early anthropological studies on Tibetan refugeness emphasised notions of adaptation, acculturation, and change as the key processes through which the history of Tibetans in exile may be charted (Basu 2018, 8). As Sudeep Basu argues in *In Diasporic Lands*, such a line of enquiry tends to portray Tibetan selfsettled refugees as an emasculated version of an earlier preexilic Tibetan society, with the refugee social formation treated as “inauthentic” and “less Tibetan” (Basu 2018, 8–9).

More recent critical engagement locates the “hybridisation” of identities in general, and the Tibetan identity in particular, in the process of globalisation. Undoubtedly, the Tibetan diaspora has been subjected to global cultural flows, leading to the possible “erosion, strengthening and emergence of new identities or new ethnicities” (Hall, cited in Gillespie 1995, 17). In this context, Mallica Mishra points out that, in the atmosphere created by the overarching effects of globalisation, “the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship and other identitymarkers), while important, can become slippery, as the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of

transnational communication” (Mishra 2014, 8).

In both cases, there is an anticipated dilution of identity in an unwholesome way. While “cultureconflict” between the refugees and the host population is to be eschewed at all costs, a “bicultural resolution” envisages the foregrounding of a distinct, reformulated strain of identity that may be traced back to spatial roots, history, language, and culture, without losing sight of the conscious goal of local integration. It is in this context that the present paper seeks to engage with the realities and necessities of Tibetan refugee identity through two allied conceptual lenses. One is the idea of *postmemory* as theorised by Marianne Hirsch. This may be called the mnemonic register of reimagination, reformulation, and reinvigoration of the Tibetan identity threatened by anticipated dilution under the stress of acculturation and globalisation.

Two is the *rehearsal* of statehood carried out in all its seriousness and intimacy by the Central Tibetan Administration: a mimicry that is futuristic in its anticipation of sovereignty. Though apparently disparate, these two are allied in the larger narrative of how the Tibetan identity is reimagined and preserved. Postmemory supplies the emotional and cultural content, while the “rehearsal” of the state provides the institutional framework within which these memories are politically framed, enacted, and stabilised.

Postmemory and the Transgenerational Tibetan

Hirsch defines postmemory as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up” (Hirsch, “About the Concept,” cited in Roy, 2025). This implies the constant presence of overwhelming inherited memories, so much so that they become personal memories in their own right. This is extremely pertinent to a majority of Tibetan refugees today. Almost sixty-six years have elapsed since the Dalai Lama crossed the mountains from Tibet and reached India in 1959. Consequently, the first-generation refugees whose lives were materially inscribed by the momentous trauma of 1959 (and the initial years of adaptation and assimilation that followed) have dwindled in number. Today we have the succeeding generations who, though not direct witnesses or victims of 1959, are indirectly impacted by the traumatic fragments of the past that they carry with them: the “postmemory” in the sense Hirsch uses the term.

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch dwells on the relation to a parental past so that “descendants of victim survivors as well as of perpetrators ... connect so deeply with the previous generations’ remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of memory and that, in certain extreme

circumstances, memory can be transferred to those who were not actually there to live an event” (Hirsch 2012, 3, emphases in original).

In her preface to *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance across Tibetan Exile* (2025), Tsering Wangmo Dhompa observes:

Belonging is a conundrum, even to Tibetans of my generation, born as refugees in India and Nepal. We are not the Tibetans who had to flee from homes tucked deep within the folds of mountains and walk over the Himalayas to keep alive. We are not the ones who through our labour helped build a nation in exile under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We are not the ones whose life choices were shaped by estrangement. Yet we learned from the generation who fled Tibet that being a Tibetan in exile was not the same as being a Tibetan in Tibet. They became refugees; we were born refugees (Dhompa 2025).

This dichotomy between *becoming* refugees and *being born* refugees is mediated by the intergenerational transfer of memory and trauma. In a way, the guardianship of the stories of Tibet, the Chinese aggression, the flight of the Dalai Lama, and the subsequent hardships of finding space in a new country and environment rests with the present generation in the form of “transferred knowledge of events ... being transmuted into history or into myth” (Hoffman 1997, 19).

This intergenerational act of memory transfer and enactment through lived practices and rituals are, in many ways, so many acts of traumatic witnessing, something that Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman call *testimony*:

The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearers, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the events come to be inscribed for the first time. By extension the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a coowner of the traumatic event: through his very listening he comes to partially experience trauma in himself (Laub and Felman 1992, 57).

It is indeed productive to explore the ways the construction, perpetuation, and recycling of memory—most of which are traumatic memories—from the previous generation can be transformed into a potent political act of resistance, leading to the preservation of a distinct sociocultural and geopolitical identity of the Tibetan refugee formation. Tibetans in exile exemplify this condition: for them, Tibet is an “imagined” place transmuted into a “remembered” place through the narrative passed on from one generation to the next, leading to enactment through ritual, and all of these practices are preserved as a cornerstone of identity. This is of paramount importance given the pressures of unimaginative acculturation and globalisation-induced homogeneity.

The construction and perpetuation of traumatic memory

within the Tibetan exile community occurs across multiple registers, broadly aligned to the idea of postmemory. Family narratives passed on like a generational heirloom play a fundamental role. Stories of escape across treacherous Himalayan passes, the destruction of monasteries back in Tibet, or the Dalai Lama's leadership in exile circulate within households, becoming part of the cultural upbringing of young Tibetans. Trauma thereby gets metamorphosed into a sort of cultural capital. These narratives become mnemonic registers of a shared cultural/ethnic identity that proclaims simultaneously a bonding based on a shared traumatic past and an assertion of difference grounded in history and culture.

Clare Harris, in *In the Image of Tibet*, notes how exile art reproduces imagined images of Tibet—mountains, monasteries, and saints—reinforcing for younger Tibetans a visual memory of a place they have never seen. For instance, *Thangka* paintings that form a part of Tibetan cultural consciousness “remain empowering within Tibetan Buddhist practice and as markers of important life events. They continue to have a role when commissioned for the commemoration of the dead, to aid good rebirth, to tell tales of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, to gain merit, and occasionally to assist in meditation and visualization ... as they did in pre1959 Tibet. But images made by Tibetan exiles (and not just thangka paintings) also provide recognizable proof of Tibetan identity, the tangible evidence of difference and cultural distancing from the new

local context” (Harris 1999, 12–13). Material and visual arts that partake of a preexilic life are signifiers that mark spaces as distinctly Tibetan. These markers, both in terms of content and form, are the products of an unbroken intergenerational transfer of skill, ideas, and memories of lived experiences.

This is a symbolic negotiation of belonging involving “strategies and tactics, both material and symbolic, to undertake ‘placemaking’” (Basu 2018, 2), as prospects of an immediate return are not very encouraging. When it comes to performing arts, the authenticity of Tibet is simulated through the backdrop; quite often the Potala Palace is a favoured location, creating a psychological spatial proximity for the displaced. Institutions such as the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, and the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, function as custodians of cultural memory, transmitting language, rituals, and traditions.

Religious practice, too, becomes central to sustaining postmemory: monasteries in exile replicate those destroyed or controlled in Tibet. Wherever Tibetan refugee camps have been set up, one sees the *tharchok* (prayer flags) fluttering, and the *chorten* and *gompas*, symbolising the undying continuity of Tibetan traditions even in exile. “Most of the rituals connected with birth, death and marriage, which were an integral part of the religious life in Tibet, continue to be followed in exile” (Mishra 2014, 15). In so far as commemoration is a public and

political act, the ritual performance of remembering the 1959 uprising through mass protests every year on March 10 is the acting out of a historically inscribed collective memory. To that extent, postmemory scripts a subversive and historically inflected narrative of resistance.

Language, Education, and the Art of Exile

Intergenerational memory transfer cannot function without a language. A language is not merely a medium of communication; it originates from a specific sociocultural and religious discourse and goes on to popularize and perpetuate that discourse. Consequently, the loss of cultural memory through linguistic marginalisation due to globalisation and the dominance of other languages (including Sanskrit-oriented curricula) can be a major concern (Mishra 2014).

As an antidote to this, the Central Tibetan Schools Administration facilitates the use of the mother tongue, Tibetan, as a medium of instruction in all Tibetan schools up to grade V, and thereafter the language is taught as a second language (Mishra 2014). The classroom is the prime socialising space for refugee children, and the educational structure in place prevents the obliteration of the cultural memory of the Tibetan experience.

With regard to this, it is pertinent to refer to the book of paintings compiled by Sarah K. Lukas and Kitty Leaken,

collected from the children of the Tibetan Homes Foundation in Mussoorie, a school established in 1962 to cater to the needs of disadvantaged Tibetan refugee children in South Asia. The book is titled *The Art of Exile: Paintings by Tibetan Children in India* and is divided into four major parts: *Leaving Tibet*, *Life in India*, *Remembering Home*, and *Political Paintings* (Lukas and Leaken 1998). These sections reveal how these children keep their Tibetan identity alive through the act of inhabiting the memories of the parental generations.

The ethnographic texture of everyday exile life illustrates how postmemory inscribes real spaces. In Dharamsala, one finds prayer flags and posters of the Potala sold beside packets of Indian spices. The exilic life constantly negotiates between the present and the past, the experienced and the remembered. A dense fabric of remembrance is forever being created through the most commonplace everyday acts: schoolchildren writing an essay on “My Country Tibet,” monks chanting for the peace of those who lost their lives on the day of the uprising in 1959, grandparents reminiscing about Lhasa over butter tea. Schoolchildren in all Tibetan schools sing both the Indian and the Tibetan national anthems, embodying a dual belonging while affirming a loyalty to a homeland never seen but always “remembered.”

The way postmemory functions brings into its ambit not merely identity preservation but political resistance as well.

Cultural preservation itself becomes an act of selfassertion. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, founded in 1959, stages traditional opera and music suppressed in Tibet, asserting cultural sovereignty through performance. Performers often describe their work as a way of “keeping Tibet alive on stage” (McConnel 2016, 45). By keeping alive a sense of national identity in the absence of a homeland, Tibetans resist both cultural assimilation in India and political erasure by the Chinese state. Consequently, inherited memory does not paralyse communities but has the capacity to generate action. Indeed, postmemory is the nebulous, ceaseless script that provides the rationale for political action.

Resistance takes multiple forms. Commemoration of March 10th serves as annual protest: in Dharamsala and across exile settlements, second and thirdgeneration Tibetans organise rallies, hunger strikes, and vigils. These are not merely symbolic acts but manifestations of continuity with the struggle of 1959, reiterating Tibetan refusal to accept Chinese sovereignty. Youth organisations such as *Students for a Free Tibet* and the *Tibetan Youth Congress* transform inherited memories into transnational political campaigns, often linking the Tibetan struggle with broader discourses of human rights and decolonisation (Mishra 2014; 13; 17).

Rehearsing the State: The Government in Exile

I shall now turn to the issue of what Fiona McConnell famously calls “rehearsing the State.” No government or state legally recognises the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE). In essence, this institution has no legal jurisdiction over territory in Tibet or in exile; it operates within the sovereign state of India (McConnell 2016, 2).

And yet, we have the Parliament in Exile with elected representatives from all three provinces of Tibet, representatives from the five Buddhist sects, and representatives from various parts of the world. We have the duly elected *Sikyong* and the *Kalons*. The *Charter of the Tibetans in Exile* is the supreme law governing the functions of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) (Roemer 2008, 75). After 14 March 2011, an amendment to the Charter was made whereby His Holiness devolved full political authority to the popularly elected leadership headed by the *Sikyong*. The Charter is a detailed, quasiconstitutional document spanning forty-five pages and eleven chapters, with a Preamble, Directive Principles, Fundamental Rights and Duties, and a clear demarcation of the rights, functions, and prerogatives of the three arms of governance: the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judiciary.

In real terms, the CTA, through its structured hierarchy of functionaries, organises parliamentary elections, manages many educational institutions, initiates and executes health

campaigns, designs welfare programmes in the settlements, and oversees international advocacy programmes. It acts as an overarching structure of liaison and advocacy at the global level. However, of greater interest is the *symbolic* dimension of the governmentinexile, which may be read as a “rehearsal” for the State that is presently an “imagined” one and perhaps a “remembered” one.

A “rehearsal” always carries with it the possibility of the “real” in the future; more importantly, it signifies participation, practice, expertise, and engagement, leading to solidarity based on a shared sense of identity. This rehearsing of the state, in a condition without territory or sovereignty, is an overarching psychological metanarrative that stabilises and embodies the fragments of memory circulating in the collective consciousness of the exile population. Though it has a concrete and functional institutional framework, the governmentinexile draws its power and functions through images, metaphors, and representational practices. Exile polity has strategically fused the inherited cultural memory with embodied political practice to sustain a coherent national identity.

Tibet persists not in a despairing nostalgia but as an active project of cultural and political continuity, keeping the possibility of territorial sovereignty alive, however deferred. With the passage of time, the “governmentinexile” becomes

less a mere aspirational construct and more a lived, performative site of Tibetan nationhood.

Conclusion

One may engage with the question posed by Snellgrove and Richardson, “What now becomes of Tibetan civilisation?” (Snellgrove and Richardson, cited in Harris 1999, 7; see Harris 1999). While it is true that “Tibet does not exist as a nation in the nomenclature of contemporary world politics,” it is very much a part of the global imaginary. Ironically, it is not the population of the Tibetan Autonomous Region but the smaller community of exiles who formulate, perpetuate, and reinvigorate the idea of Tibet in the global imaginary (Harris 1999, 7–8; McConnel 2016, 15).

Hence, with the passing of generations and the dilution of first-generation lived experiences, the use of *postmemory* and state *rehearsal* as political tools of resistance gains paramount importance in the preservation of a distinct sociocultural, ethnic, and political identity. Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, when brought into dialogue with the idea of a “rehearsed state,” reveals a strategic palimpsest of identity preservation where intergenerational memory transfer transmutes into lived political practice. In exile, the Tibetan subject is thus simultaneously a *rememberer* and a *reperformer* of nationhood: remembering the homeland through stories, rituals, and art, and rehearsing the state through institutions, elections, and

advocacy. Together, these two processes secure not only the survival of Tibetan identity in a condition of statelessness, but also its capacity to project a future sovereignty, however deferred.

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