

Sixty-six Years of Resistance in Exile: A Reflection of Tibetan Refugees in Aruna Nagar, Delhi

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Abstract—The paper seeks to examine the sixty-six years of Tibetan exile in Delhi, India, analyzing their life in Delhi as a sustained condition of political struggle rather than mere political displacement. Tibetan refugees constitute one of the most politically distinct and culturally cohesive refugee communities in India. Delhi, being one of the major urban centers and a political hub, hosts a notable proportion of the Tibetan refugee population that occupies a unique socio-legal position, neither fully assimilated nor entirely marginalized. Utilizing a qualitative method approach that combines qualitative interviews, participant observation, and analysis of policy documents, this study investigates the ways in which Tibetan refugees navigate their stateless identity and articulate the longing within the Indian state framework. For this research, we are going to explore certain formal Tibetan organizations and informal community networks to understand their everyday resistance in exile.

Index Terms—Tibetan refugees, Tibetan exile, Statelessness, Delhi, Indian framework

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than six decades, the Tibetan presence in India has stood not simply as a story of refuge, but as one of the most enduring experiments in political survival without sovereignty. Nowhere is this more visible than in Delhi, where Tibetan refugees inhabit a deeply paradoxical space within the Indian state: protected yet undocumented in the full civic sense, institutionally organized yet formally stateless, culturally rooted yet territorially displaced. This research begins from the premise that exile, in the Tibetan case, is not a suspended aftermath of loss but an active and continuously reproduced political condition. Situated within the urban landscape of Delhi, particularly spaces such as Majnu ka Tilla, the

study explores how prolonged displacement has evolved into a sophisticated grammar of resistance expressed through everyday practices along with formal ways of resistance through the government in exile, educational institutions, community governance. Moving beyond humanitarian narratives that reduce refugees to passive recipients of state benevolence, the paper foregrounds Tibetan agency in negotiating legal ambiguity, preserving collective memory, and sustaining a political identity across generations.

The rationale of the study revolves around the fact that India being one of the largest hubs of the Tibetan refugee population and yet the existing literature does not adequately capture this resistance in exile in India. While many studies do exist on Tibetan refugees in places like Dharamshala, their resistance and existence in metro cities like Delhi remain under-theorised. Thus field study was conducted in Aruna Nagar, one among the largest Tibetan settlements in Delhi. The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an ethnographic approach. Fieldwork was conducted in and around Aruna Nagar (Majnu ka Tilla), one of the most prominent Tibetan settlements in the city. The sample size is Twenty Five. The study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse set of respondents, including community members and individuals associated with Tibetan organizations and institutional structures in exile. The research incorporates secondary sources, including policy documents, academic literature, and institutional publications, to contextualize the empirical findings within broader legal, political, and historical frameworks.

By placing lived experience in dialogue with questions of statelessness, refugee governance, and the “right to have rights,” this study seeks to show how the Tibetan community transforms ordinary acts of survival into

enduring political practice. In doing so, it offers a sharper understanding of how exile in Delhi functions not as the erosion of nationhood, but as one of its most resilient contemporary expressions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In his book, “Freedom in Exile”, the Dalai Lama gives us an outlook on the Tibetan historical tragedy in the 20th century. The work focuses on the complex and strained relationship between Tibet and the People's Republic of China in the early years of Communist growth. The Dalai Lama was born in 1935 in a quiet place called Taktser, where he was a simple boy named Lhamo Thondup. But far away in Lhasa, something significant was taking place. The thirteenth Dalai lama passed away, creating a major leadership vacuum. As a result, Tibetan monks and leaders all over the country were in search of his reincarnation. This led them to the village Taktser and to Lhamo Thondup. Tibet has long remained isolated from modern geopolitics, and suddenly it faced a powerful challenge when the People's Republic of China sent its troops into Tibetan territory. At this juncture, the Dalai Lama, who is still a teenager, is forced to assume full political authority. A pivotal moment came with the signing of the 17th Point agreement in 1951 between Tibet and China, which promised autonomy and protection of religion while accepting Chinese sovereignty.

The Dalai Lama reluctantly cooperated with the hope that it would prevent violence and protect Tibetan culture. During this period, he also travelled to Beijing, where he met with major communist leaders like Mao Zedong. His first impression of Mao was as an intelligent and charismatic person, but soon he realized that communist ideology views religion as a barrier to political progress, thereby straining the relations. Soon, tensions worsened across Tibet. Chinese reforms in eastern regions provoke resistance, particularly among Tibetan fighters who fear the destruction of their cultural and religious traditions. Thousands of Tibetans gather around his palace in Lhasa to protect him, and the situation quickly turns into a full-scale uprising.

Asia was entering a new phase in 1949 when the Chinese Communist government under Mao Zedong. At that time, Nehru was of the view of maintaining peace in Asia and avoiding military confrontation

since India had recently gained independence. Tibet had historically maintained close ties with India in cultural and religious matters. Therefore, by and large India's relation with the Tibetan community had been really cordial. So when China moved its armed forces towards the Tibetan territory, Tibet expected India to raise the issue strongly at the international level. When China moved its army into Tibet in 1950, the Tibetan government hoped that India might raise the issue strongly at the international level. This cautious diplomacy of India became even clearer with the signing of the Panchsheel Agreement with China. The Dalai Lama reflects on this moment with a sense of quiet sadness rather than anger.

The Dalai Lama suggests that Nehru believed cooperation with China would preserve stability in Asia, even if it meant sacrificing Tibet's political claims. Nehru and the Dalai Lama had personal meetings where Nehru appeared as a leader who sympathized with the Tibetan cause but felt constrained by strategic realities. Nehru, therefore tried to manage two things: maintaining diplomatic relations with China and also offering humanitarian support to Tibetan refugees. This balance came in the form of allowing the Dalai Lama to settle in India, eventually establishing the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala, which was a significant act of support. Nehru avoided formally recognizing Tibetan independence and, at the same time, avoided aggressively challenging China. The breakout of the Sino-Indian war revealed the fragility of the India-China relationship. What emerges from this book “Freedom in Exile” is not a harsh criticism of Nehru, but it reveals how difficult it could be for leaders to make difficult choices in geopolitics. The Dalai Lama portrays Nehru as a thoughtful and principled statesman who believed in peaceful coexistence but underestimated the strategic ambitions of China. For Tibet, this meant losing the possibility of strong international support at a critical moment in its history.(Lama,1990)

The book Voice for the Voiceless, written by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, gives an eloquent account of the 1950 entry of the People's Liberation Army into Tibet as an act of military aggression, not the “peaceful liberation”(which Beijing claims). The Dalai Lama understood the deep ideological fractures between Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Communism during his meeting with Mao Zedong in Beijing. Mao's

assertion that “religion is poison” pointed towards the Communist Party’s commitment to dialectical materialism and its skepticism toward religious institutions as remnants of feudalism. The Dalai Lama did not entirely dismiss socialism; he actually related to its focus on equality and poverty alleviation. The Dalai Lama’s visit to India in 1956-57 during the Buddha Jayanti celebrations provided both spiritual comfort and political insight. Importantly enough, he also met Jawaharlal Nehru, whose advice revealed the limits of postcolonial diplomacy.

Nehru suggested the Dalai Lama return to Tibet and negotiate with China, stressing the need for regional stability and peaceful coexistence. While sympathetic to Tibetan culture and religion, India was not willing to risk a direct conflict with China. Upon returning to Tibet, the Dalai Lama noticed that promises of gradual reform were increasingly empty. By 1958, armed resistance movements had formed in eastern Tibet, but the Dalai Lama consistently denounced violence, seeing it as both morally wrong and strategically foolish against a much stronger military force. The crisis reached its zenith in March 1959, invoking a mass uprising when rumors about Chinese plans to detain him were circulating in Lhasa. Facing immediate danger and after religious consultations, he fled Tibet on March 17, 1959, crossing the Himalayas into India. This dramatic escape marked the end of Tibet’s effective self-rule and the start of his leadership in a government-in-exile in India. However, exile did not mean the end of politics but the beginning of a process of rebuilding. In Dharmashala, the Tibetan community forged democratic institutions which ultimately turned into the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The CTA built schools, renovated monasteries to preserve the Tibetan language and culture and slowly broadened participatory governance among its exile community in India. Elections to the government-in-exile also began to take place. This development is noteworthy in the field of comparative politics; it illustrates how a displaced population, cut off from its homeland, can still preserve its national identity and institutional framework.

A key element of this long-term strategy is the “Middle Way Approach.” Rather than pushing for complete independence, he proposed acknowledging Chinese sovereignty while striving for genuine autonomy in Tibetan regions, covering areas such as culture,

religion, education, the environment, and local governance. This approach strives to balance political reality with moral principles. Acknowledging the improbability of complete autonomy in the contemporary global landscape, the proposal nonetheless emphasizes crucial safeguards for Tibetan cultural identity. China frequently characterizes this initiative as a veiled call for separation; however, the Dalai Lama frames it as a mutually beneficial approach designed to foster harmony rather than discord. Consequently, the Tibetan situation contests conventional assumptions that equate statehood and sovereignty with territorial control. (Lama, 2025)

“Red Star over Tibet” by Dawa Norbu offers a balanced view of Tibetan history by intersecting personal experiences with socio-political analysis. It contests the romantic idea of a peaceful Tibetan society and the Chinese claim of liberation, showing a mixed reality with feudal inequalities and coercive Chinese control. The author uses familial memories and personal experiences to tell what really happened, making the text both a memoir and a commentary on social and political issues. Norbu criticizes the romanticization of Tibetan society, acknowledging the presence of feudal hierarchies, monastic dominance, and socio-economic inequalities. At the same time, he also resists Chinese propaganda by documenting the coercive and often disruptive nature of state interventions, particularly in the realms of political restructuring and ideological indoctrination. Norbu shows how religion and everyday life intersect. Monasteries were not just spiritual centres but also significant centres of economic and administrative power within the feudal societal order.

Through his work, Norbu highlights how Chinese rule brought certain transformations in Tibet. He showed both positive development and negative impact. His discussion of Maoist ideas, especially through interactions with Indian Naxalites, adds a unique comparative perspective.

In his work, “My Land and My People,” the 14th Dalai Lama expresses not just the personal story of His Holiness but also a political and moral reflection based on Tibetan Buddhism. This book creates a picture of Tibet as peaceful and moral in contrast to a harsh and destructive image of Chinese rule. Some scholars even see this work as a political document. It explains China’s entry into Tibet, a failure of the international media and countries to adequately support Tibet’s

cause, and the Dalai Lama's exile, putting it within the context of Cold War politics. The book also deals with intellectual discussions on religion and education. (Norbu,1987)

Tsering Shakya's *The Dragon in the Land of Snows* describes modern Tibetan history from the late 1940s to the 1990s. This book is important because it utilises Tibetan, Chinese, and Western sources, thereby avoiding biases as found in most of the emotional accounts. According to Shakya, Tibet is in a state of unresolved tension. His overarching argument is that Tibet's tragedy cannot just be reduced to Chinese annexation alone. It was very much shaped by Tibet's political shortcomings, Cold War geopolitics, and the indifference of a world that chose economic and strategic interest over the fate of a small landlocked civilization. (Shakya,1997)

Palden Gyatso's work *Fire Under the Snow: Testimony of a Tibetan Prisoner* functions as a micro-history showcasing the macro-level trauma of the Chinese Communist occupation of Tibet. The text debunks two competing historical illusions. Firstly, it romanticizes the Western construction of Tibet as "Shangri-La", and secondly, the Chinese imperialist framework that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) benevolently "liberated" Tibetan serfs from feudal oppression. For the Tibetan peasantry, the separation between Tibet and China was an everyday reality that was shaped by differences in culture, geography, and religion, making it difficult to understand the Chinese claims of control over Tibet. Following the 1950 Chinese annexation of Tibet, Chinese rule relied on a dual framework: Chinese nationalism and Marxist identity.

The Chinese tried to legitimize their rule by locating and demolishing the "three big mountains" weighing on the Tibetan masses: the feudal government, the aristocracy, and the monasteries. After the 1959 Lhasa uprising and his arrest, Gyatso was introduced to Phamzing (struggle session) by coercing prisoners and citizens to physically beat and denounce their peers, teachers, and family members. The Chinese Communist Party deflected the blame away from themselves and portrayed the violence as the "wrath of the serfs". During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities tried to erase Tibetan culture. They targeted the "four olds" (old culture, customs, habits, and ideas). Tibetans were forced to change their language and behaviour, replacing prayers with praise for Mao

Zedong. However, despite such strict control, Tibetans continued to resist. China controlled not just the land but also the thoughts and intellect of the Tibetans. However, the Tibetan identity and belief in the Dalai Lama survived. A classic example of this is that the younger generation of Tibetans continues to practice resistance, showing that their culture and memory cannot be obliterated. (Gyatso,1997)

Sudeep Basu's *In Diasporic Lands: Tibetan Refugees and their Transformation since the Exodus* (2018) provides an indispensable foundational text for understanding the sixty-six years of Tibetan exile in India as a condition of sustained political struggle rather than mere displacement. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Darjeeling, Delhi, and Dharamsala, Basu argues that Tibetan refugee identity must be understood as a "gradual transformation, not an automatic result of the crossing of a national border", anchored in the daily practices of place-making, cultural preservation, and political mobilisation. The work establishes that Tibetans occupy a unique socio-legal position in the Indian state framework: India's non-signatory status to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention means that Tibetans are accorded only a "refugee-like status" via the Refugee Certificate (RC), placing them in a condition of permanent liminality neither fully assimilated nor entirely marginalised governed instead by India's Foreigners Act and the ad hoc goodwill of successive governments. (Basu, 2020)

The Government of India's policy has historically been characterised by a "liberal non-assimilative framework" combined with delegated authority to the Tibetan government-in-exile (CTA) headquartered in Dharamsala, a dynamic that Goldstein identifies as foundational to how Tibetan exile life has been organised. Basu documents how formal Tibetan organisations from the three-tier settlement officer structure to the Tibetan Industrial Rehabilitation Society (TIRS) established in New Delhi to local bodies like the TRSHC operate as the institutional scaffolding through which refugees negotiate statelessness, with the settlement officer acting simultaneously as a welfare administrator and a political representative of Dharamsala's cultural preservation agenda. These formal structures are complemented by informal community networks: the ethos of rang tsho (self-help), the use of the 'Bhutia' adoptive label to navigate bureaucratic and

commercial spaces, pan-Buddhist solidarity networks between refugees and pre-exilic Tibetan hosts, and the everyday moral community sustained through the Green Book system of voluntary contributions to the exile government.

Crucially, Basu argues that what appears as adaptation or integration is more accurately a form of "everyday resistance" cultural preservation, Basu notes, "signif[ies] political acts" with "unifying effects", and Gramsci's notion of a "consciousness of historicity" that "disallows passive acceptance of the status quo" is shown to animate the community's ongoing political engagement, from the annual March 10 Uprising Day commemorations which function as a "key scenario" dramatising the ideal of Tibetan national identity to participation in Tibetan Youth Congress-linked demonstrations. Basu further exposes a central paradox of Tibetan urban exile: many town refugees obtain Indian citizenship documents as "a technique of invisibility or means for commerce", yet simultaneously continue to pay the patriotic fund and organise through exile associations because, as one respondent articulates, "with Holiness there, we feel proud we are Tibetans". The work thus positions the Tibetan refugee community not just as a passive recipient of humanitarian assistance but as political subjects who are continuously negotiating their identity and belonging within the Indian state framework, making it a critical reference for any study of Tibetan exile as sustained political struggle.

In his work, "Revisiting Home: Tibetan refugees, Perception of Home(Land) and Politics of Return" by Tunga Tarodi explores how Tibetan refugees residing in India perceive the idea of "home" after living in exile for over 50 years. For the older generation, Tibet still remains their real home, and they are longing to return back. India, for them is a temporary shelter, like a second home, in which they are residing under security and stability, until conditions in Tibet normalizes when they can return back. In fact, a section of the Younger generation of Tibetans, since they have been born and brought up in India, consider it their first home. Whereas some sections consider themselves "outsiders" in India. This article reflects how Tibet is reconstructed in exile as an idealized and sacred land, whereas its present-day realities are shaped by media and indirect expressions. (Tarodi,2011)

The article "South Asia's Tibetan Refugee Community Is Shrinking, Imperiling Its Long-Term Future" (2024), Tenzin Dorjee and Tsewang Rigzin, underscores that this exile infrastructure has been central to preserving Tibetan identity and mobilizing international advocacy for autonomy in Tibet. Dharamsala, as the headquarters of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), has served as the political and symbolic center of the Tibetan cause, enabling democratic representation, policy coordination, and global outreach. However, the article argues that this historically resilient community is now facing a significant demographic decline, which poses long-term challenges to its political effectiveness. Factors such as reduced refugee inflows due to China's tightened border controls, increased migration of Tibetans to Western countries, and declining birth rates have contributed to a shrinking population base. This demographic contraction is already affecting key institutions, including schools and monasteries, thereby weakening the social foundations that underpin the Tibetan political movement in exile.

Importantly, the article situates these demographic trends within the broader context of the Tibetan autonomy struggle. It suggests that the vitality and legitimacy of the CTA and by extension, the global Tibetan movement are closely tied to the strength of the exile community in India. As the community shrinks and disperses, there is a risk of diminished political cohesion and reduced capacity to advocate effectively for autonomy. At the same time, recent developments, such as greater access to Indian citizenship and increased engagement from the Tibetan diaspora in the West, offer potential avenues to sustain and adapt the movement. (Dorjee, Rigzin, 2024)

The article "Tibetan Migration to India: Why, When, How and With What Consequences?" by Charlotte Pehrson provides a detailed analysis of the Tibetan exile experience in India within the broader framework of migration theory. The work locates the Tibetan diaspora in the historical context of China's Tibet annexation in 1950 and the subsequent 1959 uprising, which culminated in the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans into India. It showcases how political repression, religious suppression, and fear of persecution functioned as key push factors, while India's role as a place of refuge particularly due to the presence of the Dalai Lama and

the establishment of the Central Tibetan Administration served as a major pull factor. More importantly, it examines how Tibetans in exile have constructed a distinctive and highly organized community in India, including the development of political institutions, economic networks, and cultural and religious centers. This has enabled the preservation of Tibetan identity in exile while simultaneously fostering a strong sense of nationalism. At the same time, the study reflects on the social, cultural, and psychological consequences of exile, including issues of identity, displacement, and internal community dynamics. (Pehrson,2003)

Rolfe argues that in her work, *Refugee, Minority, Citizen, Threat: Tibetans and the Indian Refugee script, Ella and the Indian Government*, instead of having formal refugee laws, rely on a refugee script, i.e., an uncodified Government. Attitudes and practices that are used to manage displaced populations. This allows the government to maintain absolute discretionary power, treating different groups inconsistently and based on political convenience. This framework, according to Rolfe, has historically integrated the Tibetans as a protected minority. They were treated with a script of hospitality and thus were viewed as guests. Rolfe further argues that the Government's script in this regard is enough to override the historical and cultural links that Tibetans share with us. For instance, in Ladakh, where Tibetans have shared cultural ties, the government still enforces a strict separation through bureaucratic barriers like special permits and registration documents for Tibetans, ensuring that they remain a separate minority. Further, there has been a decline in Tibetan rights and welfare. Since the 1980s, the GoI has largely ceased providing financial support for things like housing, etc., and stricter citizenship laws have been passed since 1986, effectively blocking second-generation refugees from getting Indian nationality status. Further, they as a community have now been subjected to overzealous security measures such as movement-restricting permits in northern border states, arrests under the Foreigners Act, etc. (Rolfe,2008)

However, one of the most significant gaps is that the existing literature did not treat the question of Tibetan refugees in exile. It mainly serves as a transition and does not deeply go into the examined exile as a social

and political experience. Another significant gap is the absence of a comparative perspective on exile.

III. DEFINITION, RATIONALE AND SCOPE OF STUDY

This study tries to explore the ways of formal and informal resistance of the Tibetan Refugees in Delhi.

1. Administrative Inclusion: A form of incorporation into state structures based on bureaucratic permissions and documentation rather than legal rights or citizenship.

2. Central Tibetan Administration (CTA): A government-in-exile institution based in Dharamshala that performs administrative, cultural, and political functions for the Tibetan diaspora.

3. Certificate of Identity (CoI): A travel document issued to stateless individuals in India, enabling limited international mobility in the absence of a national passport.

4. Consciousness of Historicity: An awareness of historical continuity and collective past that shapes present political identity and resistance strategies.

5. Cultural Preservation: The active maintenance and transmission of language, religion, traditions, and collective memory as a means of sustaining identity across generations.

6. Diaspora: A dispersed population abroad that maintains a shared identity, memory, and connection to a common homeland despite living outside it.

7. Exile: A prolonged condition of forced displacement in which individuals or communities live outside their homeland while maintaining political, cultural, and emotional ties to it.

8. Exile Institutions: Formal organizational structures created by displaced communities to manage governance, welfare, education, and political representation in exile.

9. Foreigners Act Framework: A regulatory system under which non-citizens are governed through administrative control rather than rights-based legal protections.

10. Green Book System: A voluntary contribution and documentation system used by the Tibetan exile community to signify political belonging and support for the exile government.

11. Half-Statelessness: A condition in which individuals possess limited administrative recognition

within a host state but lack full legal rights, citizenship, and political membership.

12. Informal Community Networks: Non-institutional social systems based on kinship, culture, religion, and mutual aid that support survival and identity in exile.

13. Legal Precarity: A condition in which an individual's legal status is uncertain, temporary, and subject to change based on state discretion.

14. Liminality: A state of being "in-between" social, legal, or political categories, where individuals are neither fully integrated nor entirely excluded from the host society.

15. Non-assimilative Framework: A policy approach in which refugees are allowed to preserve their cultural identity rather than being fully absorbed into the host society.

16. Place-making: The process through which displaced communities create meaningful social, cultural, and economic spaces within a new environment.

17. Rang Tsho (Self-help Ethos): A community-based principle emphasizing collective responsibility, mutual assistance, and self-reliance among Tibetan refugees.

18. Refugee Script: An uncoded set of state practices and attitudes that govern refugees through discretion, hospitality, and political convenience rather than formal law.

19. Refugee-like Status: A non-codified legal position in which individuals are granted limited protection and residence rights without formal recognition under international refugee law frameworks.

20. Registration Certificate (RC): An official document issued by the Indian state that permits residence and limited mobility to Tibetan refugees but does not confer citizenship or permanent legal status.

21. Statelessness: A legal and political condition in which an individual is not recognized as a citizen by any state, resulting in the absence of enforceable rights and protections within the international system.

22. Technique of Invisibility: A strategy whereby refugees adopt host-state identities or documents to navigate economic and bureaucratic systems while maintaining their original identity.

Rationale

The debate on Tibetan refugees in India has been largely dominated by the discourse of displacement, relief, and response strategies for such situations. This

perspective tends to assume the community as passive subjects who are being supported by the state, thereby ignoring the dynamic reality of the life that this community has created for itself through the process of exile. This study is motivated by the need to shift this perspective and examine Tibetan exile in Delhi as an ongoing process shaped by agency, negotiation, and continuity of political consciousness, rather than a temporary condition of dislocation.

A more suitable example of this context can be found in Delhi, as it has always been regarded as a hub of politics and administration. The Tibetan community living in Delhi forms a very distinctive space in the Indian social setting that does not conform to the usual categories of integration and exclusion. The community's identity in Delhi is formed in terms of administrative provisions rather than legal rights, which means that the people living in the region find themselves in a situation in which rights and opportunities are contingent on state discretion.

One of the important reasons why this study must be conducted is the paucity of scholarship on Tibetans in urban settings. Much of the research undertaken has been based on settled communities living in areas like Dharamsala or South India, where the social structure is fairly organized. In contrast, the urban setting brings about a number of changes that need to be studied, especially since here the economic activities, social interactions, and institutional involvements are much more complicated and fluid. An example of the Tibetan locality that can be taken in this regard is Majnu ka Tilla.

Moreover, another rationale of the research is to engage with wider intellectual debates on the question of how those communities that do not have any political status continue to organize and create their own identity of unity. The paper is based on the challenge of prevailing approaches that view political identity only in terms of sovereignty, proving that there are other ways to create and develop one's political identity. Moreover, it gives insight into the way host governments deal with refugees and organize them using different mechanisms that combine ethical and political aspects.

Finally, the relevance of this research is underscored by recent shifts within the Tibetan community, including changing migration trends, generational differences, and evolving engagement with the Indian state. Exploring these dynamics helps in

understanding how long-term refugee communities adapt over time while maintaining continuity in their collective outlook.

Scope of study

This study will be confined to an in-depth examination of Tibetan refugees residing in Delhi, with particular attention to multiple settlement pockets across the city, including but not limited to areas such as Majnu ka Tilla. Rather than offering a generalized account of the Tibetan diaspora across India, the research will adopt a focused, city-specific approach to understand how exile will be experienced, negotiated, and sustained within an urban setting.

The key element in the research would be the dependence of the project on field-based research. The scope of the research would comprise collecting qualitative information from semi-structured interviews and individual testimonies of Tibetan refugees representing different generations and occupations. Thus, such a method will help us obtain a rich picture of the way Tibetan refugees view their own identity, place in society, livelihoods, and social lives in exile. Moreover, the project will include institutional interviews with people who work in the Bureau of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, located in Delhi, and teachers working in schools opened for Tibetan refugees.

In addition to the collection of primary data, there will also be a careful examination of the relevant secondary sources of information, such as scholarly literature, policies, and academic work already produced on Tibetan exile, statelessness, and refugee governance. This twofold methodology will make it possible to produce a more nuanced analysis, which will link individual experiences to wider theoretical frameworks and structural factors.

On a related note, the scope of research will include both an exploration of the organizational forms and social networks that will affect Tibetan identity and experience in Delhi. Particular attention will be paid to cultural and educational practices that will support identity formation and collective awareness among Tibetan refugees. At the same time, this research project will set clear analytical boundaries; it will not attempt to generalize about the experiences of all Indian Tibetans, nor is it intended to present a statistical picture of refugees from the region.

However, this research has certain limitations. Firstly, the sample size is small to generalise the findings for the entire Tibetan refugee population in Delhi. Secondly, paucity of time, funds, and resources have limited our research base. Thirdly, language barrier has been a major issue because of our inability to understand and converse in the Tibetan language. Finally, the interviewer and the respondents might have their own biases which might have been reflected in this research.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

Central Question

How have Tibetan refugees in Delhi transformed prolonged exile into a sustained form of resistance within the Indian state framework?

Subsidiary Questions

- How do Tibetan refugees in Delhi negotiate their political position within the Indian state despite the absence of formal citizenship?
- How does the legal status of Tibetan refugees in India shape their access to rights and their strategies of survival and resistance?
- How is Tibetan cultural identity maintained and mobilised in exile as a means of sustaining collective resistance?
- In what ways does everyday life among Tibetan refugees in Delhi function as a site of subtle and sustained resistance?

V. HYPOTHESIS

Although Tibetan refugees in Delhi do not possess formal citizenship and occupy a distinct legal status within the Indian state, they nonetheless experience a framework of protection, autonomy, and cultural freedom that enables them to sustain a cohesive community and institutional life in exile; within this enabling environment, their everyday practices, cultural preservation, and political organization function as sustained forms of resistance embedded in their condition of prolonged exile.

VI. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the lived experiences of Tibetan refugees in

Delhi and to understand exile as a sustained social and political condition. The study is grounded in an ethnographic approach, which enables a close engagement with everyday life, allowing the research to move beyond abstract representations of displacement and instead foreground the meanings, practices, and interactions through which refugee life is constituted. Fieldwork was conducted in and around Aruna Nagar (Majnu ka Tilla), one of the most prominent Tibetan settlements in the city. The site provides a rich socio-cultural and institutional landscape, making it particularly suitable for observing how community life, cultural practices, and informal networks operate in an urban exile context. The sample size is twenty five.

The study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse set of respondents, including community members and individuals associated with Tibetan organizations and institutional structures in exile. This approach allowed for both guided inquiry and flexibility, enabling respondents to articulate their experiences, perspectives, and interpretations in their own terms. In addition to primary data, the research incorporates secondary sources, including policy documents, academic literature, and institutional publications, to contextualize the empirical findings within broader legal, political, and historical frameworks. The combination of primary and secondary data allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the structural conditions shaping Tibetan refugee life as well as the everyday practices through which these conditions are negotiated.

The study involves interviews of the employees in the Central Tibetan Administration, staff in Tibetan school under Tibetan Children Village, and some locals of Majnu Ka Tilla. These interviews were done through an interview schedule which is as follows:

Field Trip Questionnaire :-

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Place of Birth:

Current Residence:

1. Tibetan Way of Life How would you describe the traditional Tibetan way of life? What role does religion play in your daily life? How has living in India affected your culture? Are younger generations connected to Tibetan traditions?

2. Forms of Resistance Are you associated with any Tibetan political organizations? Do you participate in protests or campaigns? Do people boycott Chinese goods? Are there community awareness groups?

3. Everyday Struggles & Survival What are your sources of income? Do Tibetan associations support you financially? Are you affiliated with freedom movements? Is your religious life preserved in India? Would you return to Tibet if conditions improve?

4. Life in India How has your experience been in India? Do you face challenges in jobs or education? Are you free to travel or visit Tibet?

5. Middle Path Approach Are you aware of the Middle Way Approach? Do you support peaceful negotiation with China? Does Buddhist philosophy influence your political views?

Ethical considerations form a central component of the research design. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose and scope of the research prior to their involvement. Consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity of responses has been maintained to ensure privacy and confidentiality of data. The data collected is used strictly for academic purposes, and care has been taken to represent participants' experiences accurately and respectfully without causing any harm or misinterpretation.

VII. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hannah Arendt's analysis of statelessness in Chapter IX of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1959) "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" offers the most structurally precise theoretical framework for understanding the condition of Tibetan refugees in Delhi. At the heart of Arendt's argument is what she identifies as a triple cascade of dispossession: once refugees leave their homeland, they become homeless; once they lose their state, they become stateless; and once deprived of the state's protection, they become rightless. This is not a contingent misfortune but a structural problem generated by the modern international order itself, in which the nation-state system has produced a world where political membership is entirely dependent on belonging to a recognized national community. For those who fall outside this framework, Arendt argues, the abstract proclamation of universal human rights offers no actual protection, because rights in practice are only

enforceable within a political community. The most celebrated expression of this insight is her formulation of the "right to have rights" the recognition that before any specific right can be claimed, a person must first belong to a community capable of guaranteeing those rights. Arendt further draws an analytically important distinction between the fully stateless and what she terms the "half-stateless" those who retain some degree of institutional recognition and cultural tolerance from a host state, but whose more fundamental rights to residence, work, property, and political participation remain contingent on administrative discretion rather than enforceable law. Tibetan refugees in Delhi inhabit precisely this half-stateless zone that Arendt describes. Following the failed 1959 uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama's administration into exile, Tibetans arrived in India under what amounted to a unilateral political gesture by Prime Minister Nehru an act of grace rather than a legal obligation, since India is not a formal party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Registration Certificate (RC) system that governs Tibetan legal status in India is an administrative instrument, not a citizenship pathway: it permits residence and limited movement, but must be periodically renewed and can, in principle, be revoked. Tibetans cannot hold Indian passports, face restrictions in formal employment and property ownership, and travel internationally on a "Certificate of Identity" a yellow booklet issued by India that many countries do not recognise as a valid travel document. No state in the international system issues Tibetans a passport; China, which claims sovereignty over Tibet, offers no consular protection to the community; and the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, while exercising quasi-governmental functions, is recognised by no sovereign state. Three generations of Tibetans have now been born in Delhi without a resolution to this condition born stateless, in Arendt's precise sense, on Indian soil. What makes Arendt's framework particularly illuminating for this study is her insight into how stateless communities respond to their condition. She observes that stateless peoples, far from embracing a universal "human" identity stripped of national particularity, tend instead to cling ever more fiercely to their national identity because it is the only remaining marker of their belonging to a civilised world. "The abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greatest danger," she writes, and in

response, the stateless insist on their nationality as "the last sign of their former citizenship." This is not mere sentiment or cultural conservatism; it is a political strategy. The Tibetan community's extraordinary institutional density in Delhi its monasteries, schools, the exile parliament, the Green Book issued by the CTA functioning as a quasi-passport reflects exactly this dynamic. The preservation of Tibetan cultural and political identity is simultaneously an act of collective survival and a rights-claim: an insistence that there exists a Tibetan people with a history, a civilisation, and a legitimate political community, whose claims on the world cannot be extinguished by the absence of a state.

VIII. FINDINGS

Historical Background

The history of Tibet reflects a complex interplay of religion, polity, and external influences that has shaped its contemporary identity. Traditionally, Tibet has always functioned as an independent civilization unit with a distinct cultural and political system where temporal and spiritual authority converged under the institution of the Dalai Lama. From the 17th century, this theocratic governance provided relative stability, deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy and monastic institutions. In addition, our field interviews also gave us insights into the political and cultural history of Tibet. We interviewed Mr. Tsering Dorjee, the local settlement officer for Samyling settlement a.k.a Majnu ka Tila. who said:

"Tibet historically had its own political system with kings and later a theocratic rule under the Dalai Lama, especially from the 17th century onwards."

(Tsering Dorjee, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

However, the mid-20th century marked a turning point. Tibetan history in the 20th century reflects a complex transition from relative independence to incorporation into the modern Chinese state, along with the rise of a global Tibetan exile movement. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Tibet expelled all Chinese diplomats under the 13th-century Thubten Gyatso. He proclaimed that the relation between Tibet and China was that of a priest and a patron. However, during this time, Tibet remained diplomatically

isolated and was not widely recognised by any country intentionally

This autonomy came to an end when the communists under Mao Zedong won the civil war, and the nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek retreated to the island of Formosa. Mao proclaimed the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949. The new state started asserting its sovereignty over Tibet. The Tibetan authority signed the Seventeen Points Agreement with the Chinese government which maintained autonomy under Chinese sovereignty. However, the repeated suppression of religious practices and infringement of private spaces led to widespread protest against the Chinese government. The biggest among them was the Lhasa uprising of 1959 after which the current Dalai Lama came to India where he established the government in exile in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh [the central Tibetan authority]. This rhetoric was also visible in the interviews given by Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) officials. For instance

Mr. Tasree Dorjee recounted how:

After China's entry into Tibet in 1950, the 14th Dalai Lama assumed leadership at a young age and initiated reforms. Following the 1959 uprising, he fled to India, where the Tibetan government-in-exile was established."

(Tasree Dorjee, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

A first hand account of this mass migration of Tibetans to India was given to us by a respondent in the study. We interviewed Mr. Migmar, the headmaster of the TCV Day School in Samyelling. He was born in Tibet and migrated to India at the tender age of eight. He talked to us about the harsh journey he and his family took to reach India -

"Nobody ever mentioned India in front of me, then I just escaped from Tibet, to India. We had 28 days for our flight before the Chinese authorities could know of our disappearance. At night time, we climbed the mountain, crossed the river, and also climbed the glacier, like these things. You feel like a movie. During the day, we are sleeping, we are resting, because at the border the Chinese soldiers, if they saw us, they could kill us. I was the youngest one, others helped me, they carried me on their shoulders, like this

thing. And also we just crossed the mountain, and also the river, very difficult, I just remember these things.

Sometimes, I am really, really scared. I was very young, that's why I do not fully remember. We reached the Nepal border, okay after one month, we reached the Nepal border, then in Nepal, there is a Tibetan reception center. They just provide us one specific home, they just, we stay there two months. Some people need medical equipment, right? Then some, because we just came from cool weather, right? That's why, a little bit, some people are very, they are just cutting their fingers, and also some elderly generation, they are just pensioners. That's why we stayed in the Nepal reception center for two months.

After two months, they sent us to Delhi, at a Tibetan reception center, in a Buddhist market, you know, the Ladakh Buddhist market? Monastery market, Kashmiri market. On this side, there is one Tibetan reception center. Right now, I think there are no people who have come to India. Then we stay there for two or three days, okay? Then after two or three days, we are sent to Himachal Pradesh". (Migmar, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

The decades that followed were marked by profound transitions. During the cultural revolution of the 1970s, monasteries, religious artefacts, and religious institutions were violently targeted.

Several respondents in our interviews conducted talked in detail about the cultural threats in present day Chinese annexed Tibet. In an interview with Ms. Joshi Dikey, Secretary Bureau of his holiness Dalai Lama, explained how systematic cultural genocide has been happening in Tibet. This takes shape of boarding school system in Tibet wherein Tibetan children are systematically alienated from their own culture (e.g. not teaching Tibetan language) and indoctrinated in Chinese teachings and language. She said:

"Chinese government sending many Chinese to Tibet, and Tibetan become minority in Tibet itself, so it's automatically culture genocide happening. They started colonial boarding school, which is children starting from 4 to 16, they started sending school to boarding school, and in the boarding school, they never used to teach Tibetan language, it's almost 1 lakh Tibetan, these kind of students sent to boarding school, which is affecting Tibetan culture survival in Tibet. I

told you, in clinical boarding school. Since four years old, they have been taking their children and putting them in the clinical boarding school.

“They are not allowed to meet family, parents. Almost 15 years, they have to stay in school. They are not allowed to meet. Then after that, I mean, one year, two years, they come to our family. Children are very, I mean, innocent, right? They already started learning Chinese, and then parents and children, the barrier already. So after that, they don't want to talk, their parents also. Yeah, because the custom is different. Chinese teaches different customs.”(Joshi Dikey, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

In fact even after receiving education in Chinese colleges and schools Tibetans are categorically discriminated against in the job market.

“My sister and all are working in the Chinese government, but they are permanently giving that you are not promoted. They are not promoted for a lifetime. These are the things coming up.”(Participant C)

In reality there exist no freedom in Tibet. Tibetans cannot worship freely in public. Thus they have found new ways of practicing it in private for instance one respondent told us how they hide the portrait of his holiness Dalai Lama behind other picture or curtains and they secretly worship it when no one is looking. Even the monasteries they said were controlled by the Chinese authorities. One of the respondent said:

“Even in the monasteries, before the monastery, all the management things were done by the abbot. The monastery had a monk head. Now all the management committees are appointed by the Chinese government office.”(Participant D)

Civil liberties too are severely restricted and they have been subjected to an overarching leviathan state controlling and minoring every aspect of their lives.

“There's no free education, no religion, no freedom of speech. Even if you say free Tibet, then you go to jail. Lot of surveillance, 24-hour surveillance, you can say.

And police state, you can say. I mean, every 200 meters there is a police booth. Not for the security reason, just to look after Tibetans going to the protestations and everything”(Participant E)

It has become increasingly difficult for the Tibetan diaspora across the world to to maintain contact with the Tibetans residing inside the Chinese annexed territory. One respondent said:

“If I contact them(my family in Tibet), they will be punished because of me.

Before COVID, I used to talk through WeChat. Now, the government in India has banned all the Chinese apps. After that, I never had a conversation with them. But now, what is happening is that we came to know through a friend from Nepal. In Nepal, they used to have WeChat. And it's difficult to go back even at this point Difficult to meet your family. When I go to Tibet, they will put me in jail because I work for the CTA “(Participant F)

Moreover infrastructural development in Tibet by Chinese authorities has endangered the fragile ecosystem of Tibet affecting the life of several Tibetans back home whose livelihood and survival depends on it. For instance One respondent said:

“The infrastructure development is better than in India. Even in the village side. But in the infrastructure, they do deforestation, they do damming, they do mining, everything. increasing the negative impact of climate change on Tibetan people” (Participant G)

In this background our study focuses on how the Tibetan refugees who escaped from Tibet continue their resistance to these Chinese practices in exile. Tibetans fled to different parts of the world including India and continued their struggle and resistance in varied ways . Our study explores the various ways in which this resistance in exile has taken shape in India in both institutionalised ways and in the form of everyday survival as resistance.

Resistance in Exile

What instantly comes to our mind when we think of resistance is usually protests, demonstrations, rallies. Such activities may seem common in within boundaries of the state/territory, however resistance which is geographically located outside the concerned territory is an unique variant of this phenomenon. Khalistanis from India , the Tamils of Sri Lanka all have engaged in such activities. The focus of our study is the unique non- violent resistance of Tibetans in exile unlike the previous examples

mentioned. This resistance movement first began with the forceful annexation of Tibet by Chinese authorities followed by systematic efforts to destroy the Tibetan culture altogether.

Central to the resistance movement of Tibetans lies the Buddhist philosophy of the Madhyam marg. For instance The central Tibetan administration advocates for a genuine autonomy rather than full independence. Thus reflecting a pragmatic compromise and a madhyam marg solution. Moreover they give great emphasis on non violent ways of resistance and protest. In this regard one of our respondents said that Dalai Lama is a great advocate of Gandhian ways of non violent resistance. Yet today after years of frustration and stagnation in the Tibetan movement the younger generation have moved towards some violent ways of resistance as well. This was clearly evident in recent protests staged by Tibetan Youth Congress on April 10, 2026, April 25, 2026. In fact many older generation of respondents that we interviewed have now stopped participating the protests and demonstration because of them gradually turning violent now.

Formal resistance in India by Tibetan refugees

In the form of formal resistance Tibetans have built a democratic political system known as Central Tibetan administration. The Settlement officer of this Tibetan administration gave us detailed insights into how this system exists and works. In the Tibetan Govt in exile there exist a legislature (parliament in exile) democratically elected by the Tibetan diaspora across the regions of the world. Such elections also have provision for reservation of seats for women candidates. There are various departments which look after social political and economic aspects too. The Tibetan administration has staff recruited just like any other govt employee is recruited through written exams. The work and function of this administration of this central Tibetan administration is similar to the job of the Governments around the world i.e. to look after the social economic and political affairs and welfare of the Tibetan community across the world.

It is interesting to note that how the mere existence of a Tibetan govt. in exile of the marks symbolic way of formal resistance in many ways. This govt. in exile which is democratic, based on universal adult franchise and has ensured ways of parity in gendered representation in the CTA is a symbolic way of

resisting the Chinese Govt. Which is neither democratic nor do they believe in such ideals.

In addition to the formal Tibetan administration, the Tibetan NGOs and Tibetan associations have actively participated and led the resistance movement in exile too. One association that we interviewed was the Tibetan Students Association wherein we interviewed a member who shared the ways in which this association plays an active role in the resistance movement.

“Yes. So now see, when I was in school, it's mandatory to become a member of the Tibetan Youth Congress. But when you reach around age 16, 17, 18, you automatically become a member of the Tibetan Youth Congress. And then when you go to college, I went to Madras. And in Madras, we have a Tibetan Student Association. For the Tibetan Student Association, at that time, we used to organize lots of panels, we used to organize lots of events, creating awareness about Tibet in the colleges, in Madras, among the public. So we do all this political activism and advocacy work since college time. So while in the service, being in the service, we do lots of political activism and political advocacy. We meet with diplomats, we meet with government leaders, we meet with politicians, we meet with n students, academics, media.

But all that we do, it's not just about politics. It's not just about helping Tibetan people. It's about building this world a better place to live.

But we want to let people know that if Tibet suffers, the world suffers. And Tibet should, as per the vision of His Holiness, should be the zone of peace.” (Participant H)

Some other mechanisms of formal resistance include establishment of Tibetan monasteries, schools and settlements in India. Schools have been one the most important ways in which the Tibetan resistance in exile has been surviving generation after generation. Tibetan refugees when they came to India were offered by J.L Nehru to send their school to children but Dalai lama then refused and said in order to keep their culture alive (as an act of resistance) they need to have separate Tibetan medium schools. This was evident in the interview with Joshi Dikey secretary Bureau of His Holiness Dalailama:

“Although JLN offered to send children to Indian schools initially. Actually, Jawaharlal Nehru told His

Holiness that you can send Tibetan students to Indian schools, but His Holiness refused that if we need to keep our culture alive, then we need to have separate schools, Tibetan medium schools. So, it's all about His Holiness' vision to survive. It's the existence of one nation, one struggle. We must keep our culture alive” (Joshi Dikey, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

In this regard we interviewed school teachers and head master of a Tibetan school in Delhi known by the name TCV. This is a school run by the NGO named The children's village. This is a primary school up to class 5. Here Tibetan language is the medium of instruction. Their books and all the reading material is printed in Tibetan language. It is only after class 5 that they are gradually introduced to languages like Hindi and English. This is in stark contrast to the imposition of Chinese culture and language on Tibetans in Tibet. Thus schools like these in India stand as symbolic figures of resistance. They are educating the younger generation in Tibetan culture and language keeping the Tibetan struggle and identity alive.

However many teachers whom we interviewed lament the loss of culture and religion in lives of Tibetans under the influence of modernity and westernization. This was also highlighted by officials of CTA like Tanzin Lesky:

“But we fear that, yes, with the outside influence, the gen-Z will move away from the Tibetan identity. especially that today we live as a scattered community spread across the world the threat of erosion of Tibetan culture remains..”

(Tanzin Lesky, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

Yet the ray of hope remains that the younger generation have learnt to adapt and portray their culture in their own new ways that keeps their culture alive and intact even today. This is evident in interviews as well. For instance Tanzin Lesky argued that despite this we see continued resilience of Tibetan identity even in younger generation when she said:

“But there is a side of positivity. Where we now understand that all the young Tibetans, wherever they are, they all are well-versed in Tibetan dances. At one point in time, when we were in school, we hardly knew one or two dances, Tibetan dances. And we were also very shy in performing in front of the audience. But

now, it didn't even take a second for them to come and dance and perform a Tibetan cultural dance.

So they are more than ever being infused or connected to Tibetan culture.

But when they perform Tibetan dance, they wear Tibetan traditional dress also. They don't dance with jeans and trousers, but with the Tibetan traditional dress. So what we see is this inter connectivity. When you perform, you also try to preserve your traditional costumes. And they make it a fashionable one also. By adapting to the fashions, new fashions. They use different fabrics, they use different designs to make it. So therefore, I think more than ever, young Tibetans are preserving Tibetan identity. And Tibetan culture. But our focus remains, more than ever, that our Buddhist culture should be indoctrinated, and should be taught to the young ones. Not just for the sake of the Tibetan people, but for the larger humanity. Because Buddhism has so much positivity to give to the world. So I have no doubt and fear that the young ones will lose their identity. They are more than ever ready to take the Tibetan identity.”

(Tanzin Lesky, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

The Tibetan administration in India has also made significant efforts in creating settlements and encouraging them to live as a close knit community together. This ensures community living and increasing the chances of survival of their culture. For this the CTA has granted lands and housing to them. Also have provided them seed money to set up businesses in these settlements. Even old age people who have no one to take care of them are provided assistance from the CTA. However these settlements have now starting to become deserted and abandoned by the younger generation which now prefers to live in cities and go abroad for education and employment. These settlements are now becoming like old-age homes one respondent argued.

Everyday existence as an act of resistance
Tibetan refugees in India have built a life beyond the territorial borders of the mainland of Tibet. Their everyday existence, their struggles, how they negotiate and survive in a foreign country also stands as an informal way of their resistance in exile. This chapter categorically focuses on this aspect of everyday existence of this community as an act of resistance.

When asked about the Tibetan way of life, respondents gave deep insights how it is practised in their everyday lives. Daily life of Tibetans in India rather than being strictly ritualistic is blend of religious teachings and their practice in everyday lives. While prayers , celebration of festivals, sermons by his Holiness Dalai Lama remain a core part of Tibetan way of life. However emphasis is more on practical application of Buddhist teachings in daily life. For instance one of the respondents said

“We practice Buddhism in our daily lives by not lying being honest not doing bad to others. In fact even if you cannot do good to others never do bad to anybody this is what Dalai Lama teaches”(Participant I)

While Tibetans may seem well infused and becoming part of the societies that they have been living in for decades now. Example wearing jeans etc they have been resilient enough to retain their traditional identity as well. This involves practicing and keeping alive Buddhism and its teaching in their everyday lives. This is evident in the following interview by Tenzin Lesky (Central Tibetan Administration):

“We have a different way of life. Right. So in exile, even among exiles, we have different, different ways of life. See, being living in India, I used to eat rice and dal. So this is an exile Tibetan way of life. But I used to wear a blazer when I go to the office. This is another way of exile Tibetan life. But in the West, the exiled Tibetans are eating burgers, French fries, and English breakfast. But that is also Tibetan exile life. And inside Tibet, the Tibetans who don't have freedom to exercise their religion, culture, language, they have a way of life which is more restricted. And they have to be resilient enough to keep their own identity intact. So basically, Tibetans are being characterized through their own culture, mostly a Buddhist culture, Buddhist way of life. Buddhism is not just about religion to us. Buddhism is not just about the faith, but it is the way of life. Our own existence has been channelized through the values and teachings of Lord Buddha. This is what it is testing. OK, so the way of life cannot be static. It is not rigid. Throughout history, it has changed. As I said before, even in exile, 50, 60 years back, we are not the people who eat rice and dal. But now in exile, we eat rice and dal. We are attached to the hot climate. So therefore, it doesn't nullify by saying that, no, no, this is not the Tibetan way of life.

Yes, this is the living Tibetan way of life. We coexist with the outside world by keeping our own identity intact”

(Tenzin Lesky, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

Thus they coexist, adapt to the external realities of a foreign land and yet keep their Tibetan culture and identity intact in new ways.

The very act of living a Tibetan way of life that the Chinese are categorically trying to dismantle in Tibet is in itself an act of resistance which is visible in India. They are free to practice their religion openly, visit Dalai lama sermons, worship his picture etc. and also practice it in their lives too.

The economic existence of this resistance movement is even more insightful. Without a formal state to fund its existence or conduct welfare. Govt. In exile has successfully carried out all its responsibilities of welfare and management of the Tibetan community across the world. This has been achieved through a careful negotiations of the Govt in exile with the countries and Ngos across the world which fund these activities in addition to a percentage of green book collection, collected by the CTA. This is evident in the interviews given by the CTA officials:

“Many western European NGOs who are giving funding to us, there is no issue. While across the world it's mostly the non governmental organization that funds us ,the USA is the only country that officially funds us in the form of USAID. While now U.S. aid for the other African countries are totally stopped, but then our funding is right, at least for 50%.”(Participant L)

Every day economic sustenance and survival of a Tibetan in India gives us a deeper insight into their life in resistance. Most of the Tibetans fail to access the government. Jobs in India and they have felt categorically excluded in the Private sectors for employment like banking even after getting the requisite education. This pertains to their non-citizen status and other related issues. Even limited portion of seats available for recruitment in CTA hardly suffices to employee all the Tibetan diaspora in India. Thus they have taken up activities like agriculture, seasonal business like setting up winter markets in India, selling handicrafts etc.

“In summer, they will do agricultural things. In winter, they go for the winter business. They used to go, they

buy sweaters in Ludhiana.Tibetan market. Tibetan market, you set up in the Indian cities and do winter time only.Most of the people in the settlement have handicrafts.We have set up handicraft things, weaving things. Now all handicrafts are shut down. Because there is no one to work.Youngster don't want to sit and work.”(Participant M)

Thus they refuse to be led down by their non citizen and refugee identity that Chinese have made them after the annexation of Tibet. They actively negotiate with their lived realities of unemployment and discrimination to by becoming a self-dependent community.Which engages in business, educating their younger generations in their own school etc.This is an act which in itself is a contribution to this resistance movement.

Moreover as a common man Tibetans face numerous challenges everyday one such problem is the problems of documentation.A Registration Certificate (RC) for residence required by Tibetans, which must be periodically renewed. A special travel document called the “Certificate of Identity” (yellow passport) instead of an Indian passport which is issued from RPO department required for travel outside country..Then even to exit India they require a special exit permit and the visa is also another problem for them.All these problems that the Tibetans face today as a stateless individuals, Tibetans refused to be defined by it anymore.They have found their owns ways of negotiating this through informal ways like bribery to speed up the process etc.For instance one of the respondents said:

“Then you have to pay a huge bribe.Tibetans are most famous for paying bribes to the Indian officers.”(Participant N)

In this struggle and resistance the role of the Indian Government is equally valuable and worthy of mention.

On the arrival of Tibetan refugees from Tibet India warmly welcomed them as guests.The Indian policy on Tibetan refugees in exile is a collision of humanitarian welfare on the one hand and Wise statecraft on the other. After the Tibetans, who involved the 15th Dalai Lama, escaped to India to avoid being repressed by the Chinese state, in their political context. The Indian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Nehru, gave them asylum on humanitarian grounds, which made it easier to stabilize and set up the Tibetan exile community on

Indian soil. It is the emergence of this form of infection due to long-term interaction between India and the Tibetan population of refugees. India does not have an integrated domestic law to deal with refugees and is not bound by the UN Refugee Convention of 1951. However, it has come up with one administrative structure to specifically administer the Tibetan refugees, who are given a registration certificate to live in the country and an identity certificate to travel, granting them a quasi-legal status.

The Indian government has also put in place a policy of rehabilitation that is aimed at self reliance and cultural continuity among the Tibetan refugees. In states like Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh, the foundation of Tibetan settlements has been provided on agricultural land. Handicraft production and small-scale businesses have also employed a number of refugees. Learning infrastructure The body, some of which are the central Tibetan School administration, has implemented educational infrastructure to bring modern learning and at the same time, maintain the Tibetan language and culture. Besides, the state has supported religious and cultural organizations such as monastic institutions in their bid to preserve their unique identity.

Political India has assumed a careful look at the Tibetan question. Although it formally accepted Tibet as a part of China. The two dimensions method reflects the very idea of trying to balance humanitarianism with geopolitical practicality in India.

In several interviews conducted we collected a ground based perspective of what Indian Govt policy has been towards Tibetans and what are their lived realities in India as a refugee.

Joshi Dikey, secretary of the Bureau of Holiness of the Dalai Lama, says that the people of exile in Tibet are very thankful to the Indian nation because it has ensured basic freedoms such as the right to religion, education, and expression. This is in contrast to the state of Tibet under China that is defined by the limitation of using the Tibetan language, restriction of political and religious conversation, and extensive surveillance measures. India is therefore seen as being a place of relative freedom and honor. Moreover, the Tibetan community in India has significant religious freedom, and this is supported by a large number of monasteries that support spiritual life.

According to the interviews of settlement officers of CTA, the Tibetan exile management of India is fulfilling its community interests by implementing settled settlement policies, such as the provision of houses, schooling, and employment opportunities. These authorities underline the contribution of Indian governmental support to the functioning of Tibetan settlements, along with the control. Meanwhile, settlement officers indicate the continued problems of a lack of economic opportunities and migration by youth populations and evolving aspirations among members of younger generations. In general, the settlement structure is based on the balance between the support of institutions, the self-government of the community, and the limitations of the Indian legal and political context.

In fact there were some suggestions too from the side of Tibetans on how Tibetans can act as a bridge in between China and India and also be helpful to the vision of Vikshit Bharat as well.

The interview of Tenzen Lekshay says that the changing geopolitical environment with heightened bilateral, multilateral, and global competition between India and China. In this context, Tibet is being put within the thought process that is not just a border problem, but it can be a strategic and normative transporter of sorts that may bolster India's standing in the world. The argument highlights efforts like Viksit Bharat and Ayushman Bharat by placing Tibet within the context of India in the greater global sense. At the heart of this approach is the Tibetan struggle that is based on concepts of nonviolence and truth and has been maintained throughout decades in resolving the Sino-Tibetan dispute. They have their origin in the civilizational and intellectual tradition of India, and specifically in the Nalanda school of tradition, which has emerged as a massive influence in Tibetan philosophical and cultural identity. In turn, Tibet is positioned not as a liability but as a source of promoting constructive dialogue, trust, and interaction between India and China, as well as the rest of the world.'

What the analysis of the interviews (Bureau of Holiness, Settlement Officer, and Tenzin Lhaksey) indicates is that India is not just a territory of refuge, but it is also a socio-political and cultural landscape that allows ensuring the Tibetan identity, dignity, and independence in exile. This is a careful balance

between the support of the welfare of the Tibetan community, freedom of religion, and continuity of Tibetan culture, and at the same time, the diplomatic sensitivity exhibited by India with respect to its relationship with China.

More so, Tibetan views incorporate India as a civilizational and normative power, especially in terms of nonviolence and truth, which have influenced the Tibetan struggle. Tibet is also projected as a prospective linkage in the global strategy of India. Nonetheless, changing desires and decreasing participation of younger generations are an important threat to continuity in the long-term.

IX. CONCLUSION

Before we begin to draw conclusions, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect more deeply on the questions that this entire narrative quietly raises. What does it really mean to belong ; does it come from a homeland, a shared culture, or something more deeply rooted within us? And when that homeland is lost, how does a community continue to define itself?

The Tibetan refugee crisis began after China's invasion of Tibet in 1950, which forced the Dalai Lama, XIV and thousands of Tibetans to seek refuge in India in 1959. While India offered asylum on humanitarian grounds, it refrained from recognising Tibetan independence due to geopolitical concerns. Over time, this displacement evolved into a long-term socio-political condition rather than a temporary crisis. In exile, Tibetans have sustained their resistance through non-violent means, guided by the "Middle Way Approach," which seeks autonomy within China through dialogue, coexistence, and moral legitimacy instead of conflict.

They have also built strong formal institutions such as the Central Tibetan Administration, a parliament-in-exile, and networks of schools and monasteries that preserve their language, culture, and political identity. Alongside these, everyday life itself becomes a form of resistance. Documents like the "Yellow Card" reflect their stateless status, while limited access to formal employment has led many to establish small businesses and rely on community networks for support. External assistance from international actors, including countries like the United States and various NGOs, further sustains their livelihood in the absence of a formal tax system.

Despite lacking a homeland, Tibetans have managed to maintain a strong collective identity through shared culture, institutions, and memory, effectively functioning as a nation without territory. This distinguishes them from many other refugee communities, such as those from Bangladesh and Myanmar, who are often more focused on survival and integration. In contrast, Tibetans have developed a high level of organisation, cultural cohesion, and political continuity, supported by a consistent commitment to non-violence and global advocacy for a free Tibet. Ultimately, their experience shows how exile can be transformed into a space of resilience, where a nation continues to exist and assert itself even without territorial sovereignty.

However, this resilience coexists with ongoing challenges. The community remains in an ambiguous legal status within India's informal refugee system, influenced by evolving state policies, security issues, and restricted pathways to citizenship that affect daily life. Generational differences make the idea of "home" even more complicated, as younger Tibetans try to balance memories of their ancestors with their own experiences in exile. The Tibetan issue shows how weak global institutions and diplomacy can be on the world stage, where strategic interests often come before moral obligations.

So to conclude, The Tibetan struggle offers a powerful lesson: a community can keep its essence alive even when it is in exile by remembering, having strong moral beliefs, and working together, while still looking for a future based on dignity, coexistence, and realistic hope. Because In the end, the Tibetan story is not merely one of loss, but of enduring resilience; reminding us that while borders may be redrawn and powers may shift, the spirit of a people, sustained by memory, culture, and hope, cannot be so easily erased.

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