

Identity in Question

The Study of Tibetan Refugees in the Indian Himalayas

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Dedicated to

Late Prof. Sameera Maiti

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

-Rumi

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Preface

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

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

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

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

India. Chapter five raises some questions related to the identity of the Tibetan refugees. Chapter six is on gender and identity issues among the Tibetan refugees. The final chapter brings out the major challenges and issues of the Tibetans and the way forward.

Acknowledgement

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

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

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

Further, it would be an injustice to the study not to mention the name of Ms. Shristi Kala Chhetri, Research Assistant. It was her sheer professionalism, enthusiastic approach, and dedication towards the study that made it happen. Literature work on the historical background of Tibet and its people, the framing of questionnaires, and a major collection of the field data were her important contribution to the research work. We also are thankful to all the

respondents and all other members who were directly or indirectly involved in the study for their most valuable feedback during the group discussions and survey. Without their kind help and support, this work would have been not possible. We are ever thankful and indebted to all our contributors for their help.

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

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

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

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Dr. Swati A. Sachdeva
Yumnam Surjajeevan

Chapter 1

Refugees and Identity: Problems and Challenges

Introduction

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

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

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