

## **Enduring Pandemic in Exile: A Study of Tibetan Refugees in India**

The world over the pandemic has raised concerns about the way vulnerable groups have been treated amongst them refugees have caught attention of many. On this the bulletin of the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that “COVID-19 exposes refugees to a new threat, one that could be even more devastating than the events forcing them to flee their homelands” (Qais Alemi 2020). With increased exposure to deprivation, systems of inequality, and delayed welfare responses of authorities, a considerable number of the refugee population of the world has been left to fend on their own. In these tumultuous times the question arises, who is to be charged with the responsibility to lead the fight against the biological as well as the socio-political virus that ails the world? As such there exist no global consensus on this issue and the response of the states differ on case to case basis. Even though multilateral organizations and local level NGOs have taken up the task in their hands but eventually the onus falls on the host government of the country where these refugee groups have been residing. However, the reality of the events is such that the host governments are already stretched out and do not have the financial capacity to take such initiatives (Nezurugo and Hassan 2020). As a result, refugees hardly ever become beneficiaries of national pandemic response plans. This situation is even more uncertain when states lack a comprehensive policy for the protection of refugees. Especially in the context of South Asian nations which are home to over ‘2.5 million’ refugees, lack of a national, regional and international policy for refugees is a matter of grave concern during the pandemic (The World Bank 2020).

The case of India is not different from its neighbors. It holds the distinction of being one of the few liberal democracies that are neither signatory of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol nor have any domestic refugee law. It has therefore only an ad-hoc policy to address their status and problems. With certain groups under the direct purview of the Government of India and others being taken care of by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) a kind of differential treatment is meted out to different refugee groups. As the Amnesty International reports, “this disparity in who handles refugees in India has resulted in an incongruity in the accessibility to documentation and essential services by different refugees' groups across the country” (Amnesty International India 2020). The result being refugees stay marginalized and are pushed to the edge in the times of health emergencies.

The arrival of the pandemic has put into focus the gaps in the treatment of these vulnerable groups. The general perception about the condition of refugees in India is fraught with “little access to government system for food distribution, health care, and fear of being reported to police and labelled as illegal residents” (Vijayaraghavan 2020). Along with this in the lived-realities of many refugees social-distancing is a privilege that most refugee communities can scarcely afford. For certain refugee groups like Rohingyas these external impediments come with an additional baggage of xenophobic responses such as “corona bomb”, make it difficult for them to embrace some sense of normalcy even in the un-lockdown period (Annesha 2020). Since most of them are engaged as laborer on construction sites, the moment it is learned that they are Rohingya ‘the prospects of landing work are diminished in a go’ (Singh 2020).

In the case of Afghan refugees most of them are daily wage earners engaged in activities ranging from medical tourism as interpreters to waiters or chefs at small eateries. Rendered jobless and without payment due to the lockdown, the added burden of mounting rents and coercion from the landlords to pay on time during the pandemic lands them in a difficult situation (Aswani 2020). Meanwhile the story of many Sri Lankan Tamil refugees is not different. From the under-educated daily wage laborer to the educated and skilled workers the impact of the pandemic didn’t spare anyone (Dwivedi 2020). For much lesser recognized refugee groups like Chin from Myanmar’s minority Christian community, Somalia and other countries the situation becomes grimmer as they seem to have been forgotten in the response plans of their host government.

With this backdrop in mind the case of Tibetan refugees stands in stark contrast to other refugee groups. The reason being for Tibetans there exists a functional government in exile (TGiE) that is coordinating its pandemic response with the Government of India, and a vast network of Tibetan settlements across the country that make it possible for the TGiE to cover Tibetans in its pandemic response plan. By keeping this context in perspective this essay will delve deeper into the impact of the pandemic on Tibetan refugees thematically, to shed light on how they have been enduring the pandemic in exile.

Before foraying into the pandemic’s impact on the life of Tibetans it is essential to understand how their situation structurally as well as politically is different from other groups. To begin with it becomes imperative to highlight the structural causes of their successful existence as refugees in India.

## **From Flight to Resettlement**

The first wave of forced migration and displacement in Tibet “began from Inner Tibet towards Outer Tibet started in the mid-1950s”(Norbu 2001). It was a result of differential policies of the Chinese authorities in both the Tibetan regions. The turning point came only after the 1959 Lhasa Uprising that Tibetans following the footsteps of their God-King i.e. the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama majorly started fleeing Tibet. The population fleeing their homeland is predominantly described as “pre-industrial or purely traditional” by Goldstein (1978) (as cited in Norbu 2001, 6). For their arrival two transit camps were set up at Misamari in Assam and Buxa in West Bengal in 1959. Due to unprecedented acclimatization challenges soon, the refugees were dispersed to colder Himalayan regions. During their stay in those refugee camps majority of them were “temporarily absorbed on road construction work” (Norbu 2001). The initial years of their arrival were largely perceived to be temporary not just by the refugees but also by the host government. But this transitory sentiment was soon trumped by the reality of the refuge. As by 1960-63 the clamor for permanent solutions was rising in the back-drop of 1962 Sino-India war and after which there was development of five major agricultural settlements in India and smaller ones in Sikkim and Bhutan(Norbu 2001).

For this purpose, the former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru requested the government of the Indian States to provide land for the resettlement of Tibetan refugees. The Government of Karnataka was the first to respond with affirmation. This was just the beginning of a long drawn rehabilitation process as Norbu describes, “it was not easy. The jungle had to be cleared, infrastructure laid and houses built. Adaptation to lower altitudes and a different climate caused health problems for many Tibetans” (Welck n.d.). On top of it as aforementioned most of the settlers were purely traditional and accustomed to nomadic way of life as a result their unfamiliarity with settled agriculture was bound to present itself as a challenge. Despite these odds by 1966 the Tibetan refugees at Bylakuppe had in the words of Melvein Goldstein (1978:399), “become a tremendous economic success” (as cited in Norbu 2001, 8). On this feat, the Indian Sociologist Girija Saklani(1984, 216) provides answers as to how this was achieved, in her assessment predominantly three reasons can be hailed for their success. First, in her view Tibetans are hardworking people with a natural instinct for trading and along with them their women folk are also equally involved in the work. All of these factors thereby made it possible

from them to have “successfully emerged from a self-sufficient barter economy into a competitive economy” (as cited in Norbu 2001, 8).

Apart from these socio-cultural factors there are political as well as structural factors equally if not more responsible for their successful rehabilitation. Norbu adeptly points them out, starting with the political weight that the Tibetan cause carried with itself. Especially in the backdrop of 1962 war and criticism of Nehru’s China Policy both of these factors along with long standing cultural affinity with Buddhism helped the Tibetan crisis gain traction not just in the domestic front but also in the International sphere at that time. Interestingly for handling the Tibetan affairs the responsibility of the task was not placed on the shoulders of the Ministry of Home Affairs instead it was Ministry of External Affairs that took charge of the matter. Due to the involvement of “highest echelons of the host government”, the Government deftly even persuaded Bhutan and Sikkim for establishing Tibetan settlements.

Another reason that factored in was the cohesive and coordinated involvement of aid donors and relief work agencies. This synergy made it possible to realize the goal of long-term settlement by focusing on immediate issues and forgoing overlapping efforts for a similar cause. Norbu calls this a “unified approach to minimize ad hocism inherent in relief operations by creating a pool of resources at their disposal with a coordinating body to deal with the basic tasks of permanent settlement”. In this situation as Tanka Bahadur Subba (1990) notes, the role of coordinating body was donned by the government of India; for this task “a Central Relief Committee of India for Tibetan refugees was set up with the aim of coordinating various relief efforts and channeling all non-governmental aids through the Central Relief Committee-1” (as cited in Norbu 2001, 10). This coordinated action amongst various stakeholders of the rehabilitation process was another facilitator.

The third factor is the role of indigenous group structure and organization of leadership in the Tibetan society. One reason for continued reliance on this traditional structure is the fact that the Dalai Lama during this journey towards India was escorted by a group of officials, aristocrats and monks alike. Rather it can be said that along with him came the state-apparatus that prevailed in Tibet, which ensured there was no power struggle in the aftermath of their resettlement in exile. As there was both veneration as well as popular acceptance of the authority. In this light it becomes crucial to note that even at this point of time during the pandemic when,

The Tibetan Government in Exile delineated from the spiritual head is neither recognized by India or any other state in the world but, “this fact still does not alter the social fact that TGiE provides legitimate leadership to the refugee community as a whole.”

In this regard Norbu’s emphasis is on the “vital as well as integrative functions” that the political structure of the Tibetan society performed back then, and performs even now. These functions begin with a popularly accepted monopoly to “represent and act on behalf of the refugees in negotiation with the Government of India and NGOs concerning relief, rehabilitation and settlement of Tibetan refugees” especially in India. In addition, Goldstein (1978) corroborates this fact by shedding light on their role as “sole spokesmen for the refugees by maintaining offices in the transit camps” (as cited in Norbu 2001, 11). But now this political landscape is evolving with role of Tibetan Residents Welfare Association (RWA) especially in case of Majnu Ka Tila or Samyeling Settlement, where the RWA has taken over the mantle and in land disputes directly negotiates with the local government authorities, this proactivity is often described as an “institutional form distinct from the formal process of Tibetan rehabilitation” (Balasubramaniam and Gupta 2020).

### **In Exile: The Pandemic and Refugee Lives**

Even before the pandemic response measures were announced by the Indian government, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in view of the unique concerns and challenges of exile developed a pre-emptive response action plan well before February 2020. The foremost concern for the CTA was to ensure the well-being of the Dalai Lama, for this purpose all of his scheduled meetings and regular audiences were suspended in January itself. The Himachal Pradesh government in Mcleodganj even established a special health outpost to screen devotees and tourists visiting the Dalai Lama (Puri 2020). By March, most of his public engagements and teachings were suspended and later on were carried out in the virtual format.

For the well-being of the Tibetans in India, The Department of Health, CTA was simultaneously working on the early containment and prevention of the outbreak way before the formation of a COVID-19 Task Force (Health Department CTA 2020). Beginning with the meeting of all the Tibetan Settlement Officers (TSO) and Executive Secretaries of branch Hospitals and clinics, they were briefed on WHO guidelines.

The TSO were then tasked to disseminate the information on social distancing measures and hand-wash hygiene in their respective settlements through the social media, and posters at all public spaces. While the branch hospitals and clinics were instructed to keep adequate stocks of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for emergency situations. At the same time, through various online platforms like TibetTV, Youtube, Facebook, Instagram regular panel discussions and briefings were organized to spread awareness amongst the community in both indigenous language as well as in English. Especially to ensure safety and health of school going children the Tibetan Children's Village Schools were shut temporarily for the students below 8<sup>th</sup> grade on 3<sup>rd</sup> March(Reporter 2020). By March 16<sup>th</sup>, all TCV schools were closed and the education then continued in the format of online classes(Tibet.net 2020).

Additionally, during this timeline a line of communication was established between the GOI and TGiE through a meeting with sub-divisional magistrate and chief medical officer of Dharamshala to coordinate the preventive measures, share information about recognized test centers across India, and to notify about any suspected cases in Dharamshala. As and when the cases started to increase in India a directive was sent to all TSOs, Executive secretaries and nurses of health centers to be prepared for contact-tracing and referral to their nearest health centers in case of any eventuality. Public service announcements were routinely delivered with regular updates from WHO, GOI. All these initiatives culminated into a COVID-19 Taskforce to spearhead the efforts.

In the following months the task at hand was to bring stranded Tibetan Students across India to their home states, for this transportation was arranged and provided to them. A relief fund was allocated and disbursed for stranded students facing challenges in sustaining themselves or attending online classes(Tibet.net 2020). While it was just recently that the Union Home Ministry allowed the return of Tibetan migrants from overseas subject to the condition that the returnees need to have been registered with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO)(V. Singh 2020).

At the community level collectively as well as individually during the lockdown residents continued to undertake preventive measures and were even in a position to extend a helping hand to vulnerable groups nearby(Tenchoe 2020). Another COVID-19 Emergency Support Fund was disbursed for distressed and stranded Tibetans in India, Nepal and Bhutan(L. Tenchoe

2020). Especially for vulnerable Tibetans like elders and destitutes who are at a great risk, the support fund has taken care of their health and basic needs.

All this while the CTA efforts also ensured that there were adequate means to take care of the mental as well as spiritual health of the Tibetans with regular prayer and counselling sessions(Tibet.net 2020). The Religious heads played their part to strengthen the community morally through special prayers and sermons.The ancient Tibetan system of medicine i.e. Sowa Rigpa is also being put to use as an immunity booster in Tibetan Settlements. It is recognized by Ministry of AYUSH as one of the “oldest, living and well documented medical traditions” that is why the CTA is awaiting the permission from the GOI to give free medical services to COVID-19 patients using this traditional system of medicine(Rana 2020).One of my respondent Phurbu Dolma talked about ‘wide dissemination of amulets’ for COVID-19 in the initial phase of the outbreak which later on was discontinued amidst contention around the medical efficacy of these objects. The CTA later issued an advisory stating that these methods are intended for the believers of the Buddhist faith.In the Tibetan Settlements more stricter initiatives were taken, which included putting barricades to the main entrance, quarantining every new arrival in the settlement before letting them mix up with their family. The CTA also created a separate webpage for COVID-19 to keep track of cases.With all these efforts wherever the outbreak happened the prompt involvement of CTA, local authorities and the residents alike ensured there was no escalation in the cases and the areas were properly sanitized (Samyeling 2020).

On the economic front the pandemic has hit the major source of income for majority (60 per cent) of Tibetan refugees involved in the winter sweater selling business. For which the procurement process used to begin in June but the lockdown measures have derailed it to the extent that the Tibetan Refugee Trader’s Association (TRTA) issued a directive to not procure garments till September(Khando 2020). With mid of October approaching only a handful of traders in the green zones were able to commence their business and majorly the business is shut. The situation becomes grimmer for the women who are actively engaged in entrepreneurial activity as it affects their source of livelihood. Since a lot of Tibetans have stopped going for the winter business due to the pandemic their dependence on remittance has increased. This has prompted some students to even give up the prospects of studying further. It becomes pertinent in the backdrop of Tibetans being asked to pay fees at par with other international students in

JNU. If the financial problems persist many families will not be able to pay school fees of their children and will have to cut down on basic living cost. Even amidst these difficult times some of my respondents were quick to put emphasis on their Buddhist faith as it has made it possible for them to accept things as 'normal' to the extent of them being better than before.

To help Tibetans tide through this difficult time the TRTA has devised a plan to commence business as 'one community' and share the profits amongst the members along with seeking financial assistance from the CTA. Such a community spirit was amplified even in case of Settlement specific strategies. During my visit to Samyeling Settlement or Majnu ka Tilla Tibetan Settlement a similar sentiment was found. The settlement officer further emphasized, food and rations are not a matter of concern as we have already made sure that no household is deprived irrespective of their capacity to pay for them.

Further on the containment and preventive measure he highlighted, the foremost concern was to send the students and Tibetan migrants' back home on time. This they ensured by arranging bus services in consultation with local authorities. The ones who stayed back on rent, it was urged in the name of community spirit to not compel them to pay during this difficult time. Initially the attempts were made to gain access to COVID Relief programs announced by the GOI. But since the Aadhar card was an essential requirement for availing the benefit, many Tibetans as a result were ineligible. That is why soon after, a common pool of essential items was created to ensure each member gets its share and even after which it was possible for them to distribute these essential items amongst other vulnerable groups in the neighborhood.

On xenophobic experience during the pandemic it came into the picture the settlement officer himself was called 'Corona-virus' and labelled 'Chinese-virus' especially in the aftermath of Sino-India border incursions. On which he said, it's a matter of shame that people do not recognize Tibetans. On probing what was his response after the incident, He shared the anecdote that a lot of students who witnessed such racial comments have started purchasing more of 'Free-Tibet' T-shirts to distinguish themselves from the Chinese and exert their distinct identity. His testimony also corroborates the argument of Mousmi Mukherjee, where she highlights the experience of Tibetan students during the pandemic. In which many respondents affirmed the spike in the number of racist incidents towards their ethnicity with the spread of the pandemic. While some suggested the racist behavior was prevalent even before (Mukherjee 2020). Some of my respondents too wavered across this continuum. From requesting no comments on this issue



to explicitly sharing the details of the incidents where they some found people “swerve away” from them. These instances then made them mindful not to cough or sneeze in public spaces ‘just to ensure no one is worried that it might be COVID-19’ and the concern of getting confused with the ‘Chinese’ was common. These instances shed light on the “complex maze of identity challenges” that Tibetans have to negotiate. As a result of these attacks the civil society organizations like the Tibetan Youth Congress “have been campaigning on the social media to educate the people about the cause of free Tibet and to also fight for their cultural rights and racist discrimination in India as Northeast Indians or Chinese”.

Speaking on the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on the personal and professional front a lot of respondents pointed out the challenges of working from home due to bad network connectivity. For some in remote areas like Gangtok and Odisha the work has become stagnant. The lockdown period itself was a ‘bit distorting’ and it took them a while as a family to get accustomed to it. The key was to indulge in creative work, prayers and appreciate spending time together to fall back to being a ‘normal happy family’. The COVID-19 has impacted everyone on all fronts be it physically, mentally or emotionally but for TenzingDhamdul the difference is that most of the Tibetans do not own land. As a result, from their economic lives to their personal lives in every sphere they have to negotiate to gain access to a piece of land. It could be for either to live or to find a space to embark on their winter-sweater selling business.

## **Conclusion**

The world-overthe spread of novel coronavirus has left nothing untouched as it doesn’t respect the borders of states, religions, races, or gender. In that sense, COVID-19 has earned itself the epithet of the great equalizer. To accept this proposition is to fall prey to the trap of convenience induced blindness. As the reality of our times is that the pandemic is not the great equalizer. Even if it impacts us all, it impacts everyone differently. The stark contrast that is seen in the management and experience of this health emergency speaks for itself. Taking cue from the situation of Afghan refugees with little to no support from any government organization to the plight of Rohingyas who can barely make the ends meet suggests, that the refugee landscape in India is in a perilous state of affairs(Saxena 2020)(Raj 2020). In this regard the structural factors responsible for the distinct resilience of the Tibetan community come handy. The fateful alliance of the host government, web of Non-governmental organizations, and the internal social

organization of the refugee community made it possible for them to become self-dependent in terms of managing their affairs albeit through funds and donations. This corona-virus pandemic stands as a testament to this fact, in which the coordinated and calibrated response of the Tibetans as a refugee community was way ahead in terms of its timing and planning. It is important to highlight the ‘opportunity and space’ that the Tibetan refugees received, in order to set it as a precedent for other refugee groups to follow. For long arguments have been made that by not being a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol India has retained space for its strategic maneuverings and saved itself from the burden of catering for the incoming refugee flows. But this argument in the face of human rights and a dignified life for refugee groups doesn’t hold a strong ground. Especially when scholars like YeshiChoeden argue to make a call for projecting to the world the project of “these thriving Tibetan settlements as a model for post-conflict reconstruction in a bid for India to acquire a greater role in United Nations’ post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building activities”(Choeden 2018). Without any doubt the reconstruction and rehabilitation experience can have huge implications for other refugee communities that are trying to reconstruct their lives from scratch. But with what credibility can the Indian state endeavor to venture into such a domain with an impending refugee crisis? To substantiate these tall claims the state need not be selective in its approach. The quest for chairing the high table as a model for post-conflict reconstruction it is imperative for New Delhi to clear all of its backlogs and provide a level playing as well as a flourishing field for other refugee groups so as they too get the opportunity to thrive as a self-supportive community. And global pandemic crisis can be well taken as a call for this much anticipated action.

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