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Voices from Exile: Exploring Tibetan Nationalism and Identity Among Tibetan Refugees Living in India

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of a nation, the construction of national identity, and individuals' acts of nationalism in the name of a nation, through the lens of the Tibetan refugee population. Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide context for these questions. The recorded data shows that the Tibetan refugee population's identification with their geographical and religious features forms the basis of the Tibetan national identity. It is seen that this identification evokes a sense of collective national trait among the Tibetan community, symbolising the preferred personality characteristics of a genuine Tibetan. Further, the community's shared belief in historical and cultural homogeneity, spiritual faith in leadership, and consciousness of belonging to a refugee group gives them a determined reason to free Tibet from the suffering of foreign occupation. Such factors eventually guide the refugee Tibetans to conceptualise and exercise Tibetan nationalism from exile.

Keywords: Nation; Nationalism; National Identity; Refugee; Leadership; Tibetan Nationalism; India

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Introduction

Examining the conception of a nation-state involves criteria such as territorial boundaries, socio-political institutions, population, and sovereignty. However, this study diverges from the conventional approach by exploring the imaginative framework of individuals who envision their nation-state without these defining characteristics. What sets this work apart is its emphasis on understanding how a strong identification with imaginative geographical and cultural features along with faith in the Dalai Lama, serves as a normative guide for Tibetan refugees, shaping their beliefs about distinctive personality traits for embodying an advocated version of Tibetan identity. One of the main objectives of the present paper is to examine the case of Tibetan refugees and their politicised aspects of life from a social-psychological perspective, which primarily centres around three key concepts: nationalism, national identity, and the imagined nation. However, these concepts have remained relatively well-established and thoroughly explored in modern political, cultural, and sociological disciplines, as well as their respective subfields. They not only abundantly examined the formation of nation-states but also addressed in great depth the complexities of identity formation, particularly in the context of both nationalism in settled times and diasporic conditions. Nevertheless, despite a significant increase in psychologists' interest in exploring the mentioned concepts through social and political psychological lenses, there is still a need for more attention to addressing the 'self' in the entire process of nation-building activities.

This study systematically examines how the Tibetan refugee population envisions their nation, constructs a national identity, and engages in acts of nationalism from exile. The introduction lays the theoretical groundwork by contextualising nationalism and national identity, framing the Tibetan nation as a social construct through the lens of Anderson's "imagined communities," and addressing the association of Tibetan nationhood with political struggle. The method section describes the peculiarities of semi-structured interviews with twenty-nine Tibetan refugees as the primary qualitative data collection tool. The findings are organised thematically across five core dimensions: the (re)imagination of national features rooted in geography and religion; the internalisation of normative national traits; the central role of the Dalai Lama as a national leader and symbol of hope; the development of national consciousness rooted in collective identity and refugee status; and the articulation of Tibetan nationalism through everyday commitments and aspirations. Finally, the discussion section interprets these findings within the broader literature on exile, stateless nationalism, and long-distance politics, reflecting on the implications of Tibetan nationalism as a form of resistance, continuity, and imagined solidarity beyond territorial boundaries.

Contextualising Nationalism

In simple terms, Smith (1991) asserts that nationalism is the attributed concept of the nation, which is a political ideology and social movement that fosters a nation's unity, sovereignty, and self-determination, typically through the preservation and strong devotion to national culture, history, language, and ethnic identity. Furthermore, early scholars, particularly Walker Connor (1978; 1994), argued that nations are organic organisations that share fundamental elements of ethnic culture and a mother tongue, and that the bond between a people and their nation is natural and historically intertwined. In contrast, modern scholars have recognised nationalism's development and its role in social and political spheres within the context of modernity. For instance, Benedict Anderson (1983), in 'Imagined Communities,' argued that nationalism is a product of modernity, popularised by print capitalism and the emergence of the modern state. His work emphasises nationalism primarily as a social construct; as he said, "the nation is imagined because its members will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear

of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1986, p. 6). However, one significant aspect of such an argument lies in the psychological process of imagining a nation that demands attention from social psychology and has been largely overlooked for decades.

The psychological intervention provided a cognitive aspect to the nationalism studies that helped develop new perspectives on the interpretation and explanation of nationalism and nation formation. For instance, the psychological perspective recognises nation and national identity as a cognitive artifact (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) that depicts the human intellectual universe (Haas, 1986). Initially, social psychologists were particularly interested in researching the factors responsible for arousing feelings of group loyalty, when such loyalty can be hostile towards other groups, how multiple loyalties determine the characteristics of nationalism, and how such loyalties influence and shape collective behaviour (Druckman, 1994). Thus, psychologists have studied nation and national identity for a long time with a constrained view of understanding intergroup relations and stereotypical studies (Druckman, 1994; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). However, over the past few decades, nationalism research has grown interested in examining the particularities of national identity (Reicher et al., 1997; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). The proponents of social identity perspectives (*particularly* Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) believe that all the aspects of national identity are persuadable to serve the ambitions of particular political projects (Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). Further, Reicher and Hopkins (2001) define national identity as a socially constructed phenomenon governed by self-categorisation and social identity processes (Khan et al., 2017; *see also* Reicher et al., 2005). However, within the diaspora, nationalism can also be seen as a response to perceived or received threats to national identity, especially from a foreign entity (Fligstein et al., 2012; Searle-White, 2001).

Contextualising National Identity

Anthony D. Smith (1991) understood national identity as a sense of belonging to a specific nation, determined by shared experiences, traditional and modern symbols, cultural beliefs, and collective memories, and it is both a psychological and social phenomenon. While highlighting the dynamic nature of national identity, Hall (1994) argued that it is not an inherent or fixed phenomenon, but rather a negotiated process that evolves over time and is shaped by the forces of social and political orders. The fluidity of national identity is particularly observable in social changes such as globalisation and social disruption, such as diaspora, where individuals experience extreme influences that challenge traditional notions of fixed national identity. For example, while a person's national identity may be shaped by the experiences of living in their motherland, it will change significantly due to their shift to a diaspora (Baumann, 1999).

Another perspective to examine national identity is intricately linked to the concepts of collective memory and belonging proposed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), which refers to how groups remember their past. Taking his views into consideration, national identity, therefore, is not merely a personal attribute; it is shaped by collective narratives that are transmitted through social and political organisations like schools, media, and political discourse, which profoundly influence individuals into internalising national symbols, historical myths, and ideologies (Halbwachs, 1992). In this way, national identity develops as a product of political and cultural assimilation, which starts to define, shape, and reshape the boundaries of who belongs to the nation and who does not. However, an epistemological understanding of nationalism and national identity remains incomplete without examining the process of imagining the nation (in this study, the Tibetan nation as a social construct), an essential mechanism through which these concepts manifest in social, political, and behavioural forms.

Imagined Nation: The Tibetan Nation as a Social Construct

Anderson (1983) situates nationalism and national identity within a broader framework of modernity. He explained how instruments of modern politics (such as print capitalism) allowed individuals to imagine themselves as part of a larger community (a transhistorical community as well as a transgenerational never-dying entity) that eventually nurtures a sense of national belonging. While Anderson's theory of imagined communities has been widely acknowledged for providing new directions in understanding the social construction of national identities, it has also been critiqued for its limited consideration of the role of power dynamics and inequalities in shaping these identities (Chatterjee, 1993; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). This critique is particularly relevant in diaspora communities, where nation-building processes are often intertwined with struggles for power, representation, and survival. For instance, the efforts by the exiled communities of the Tibetan diaspora to re-construct and continue developing a national identity are shaped not only by national imagination but also by geopolitical pressures and socio-economic disparities between the diaspora, the enemy (in this case, China is viewed as an aggressor), and the host states. The disparity in power dynamics represents how powerlessness and marginalisation influence the ways in which diasporic groups reimagine their motherland as of unparalleled aestheticism while affirming political legitimacy and social cohesion (McConnell, 2011; McConnell, 2013). Grounded in Buddhist philosophy and the political claims of Tibet's history as a sovereign entity, the imagined concept of the Tibetan nation draws heavily on shared narratives of unjustified foreign invasion, cultural preservation, and spiritual leadership under the Dalai Lama (Anand, 2000; Goldstein, 1997). The concept aligns with Anderson's notion of 'Imagined Communities', highlighting how Tibetans (mainly refugees), despite being geographically dispersed worldwide, perceive themselves as part of a unified national entity. Further, in the Tibetan diaspora, for instance, the notion of "home" is continually reimagined (that individuals form in response to lived experiences), not only in terms of physical space such as Shangri-La, but also through shared narratives, education, and the preservation of religious and cultural practices (Kolas, 1996). The following section discusses the background of Tibet as a nation and its politicisation.

Tibet - Nation and Politics

Until now, the land of Tibet has witnessed two mutually contradictory ownership claims (Tibet belongs to China and Tibet is an independent nation) corresponding to historical, geographical, and socio-cultural interpretations that both sides use to justify their claims. Considering history, communist China bases its claim to rule Tibet on the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 CE) (Kehoe, 2020), perceiving Tibet's past as an integral part of the glorious Chinese Empire. In comparison, Tibetan monarchs counter Chinese assertions by situating their arguments within a priest-patronage relationship, thereby defining their past in relation to China (Sperling, 2004; Oidtmann, 2014). Geographically, China's perception of Tibet's territory is limited to the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region' referred to as 'political Tibet.' In contrast, the Tibetan leaders recognise their territorial hold based on ethnic similarities encompassing a few regions of China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan, known as 'ethnographic Tibet' (Mukherjee, 2021). Also, China calls the Tibetan sociocultural setting feudal, hence perceives it as orthodox and conservative, and on that basis, communist China justifies its stand to annex Tibet into mainland China for emancipating the lower class from an oppressive hierarchical social setup to a social paradise (Powers, 2004; Warner, 2011). In contrast, Tibetan leaders refute this claim and present a counterargument that describes this annexation as undermining the most peace-oriented social structure. Furthermore, the Tibetan leaders perceived the intervention of China (here, China is symbolised by Dragons) as a threat to faith rather than territorial integrity and called the Chinese' *tendra*' - enemies of faith (Angmo, 2019). Such contentions, on the one hand,

fuelled strategic vitality in the communist discourse of Han nationalism in China and, on the other hand, transformed Tibet from an ethnographic region to a nation. However, the conflict emerged in its political extremity only after the establishment of the Republic of China on 01 January 1912 (Yu & Kwan, 2013). Determined by the great Han mentality, in October 1950, around 40,000 military troops of communist-controlled China crossed the River Yangtze into Tibet. They declared victory over the Tibetan forces for the first time and finally succeeded in capturing the entire Tibetan autonomous region on 10 March 1959 (Shakya, 1999). From 1959, when the leader of the Tibetan nation, the Dalai Lama, and his 80,000 followers took shelter in India, Tibetans continued to escape from the Chinese occupation through the secret paths of the Himalayas to take refuge in neighbouring countries like India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Even though the Indian government welcomed the Dalai Lama and his 80,000 followers and assisted in developing the Tibetan government-in-exile at the same time, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru did not want the Tibet conflict to toxicate the India-China relationship (Sikri, 2011). Similarly, India does not recognise Tibet as a part of China (Bentz, 2012) nor validate Tibet's status as an independent nation, indicating India's passive approach towards Tibet. However, India's treatment of Tibetans as privileged refugees (Lin, 2022), gainful employment (Norbu, 2001), granting calculated political and economic autonomy to the exiled government and reinforcing their cultural citizenship (Hillman, 2018) helped develop a semi-settled space for Tibetan refugees to continue their national movement from a position of nation-state crisis. Further, the concept of an imagined nation, limited assimilation with the host culture, interweaved religion and politics, tactics of protest in the name of their country, limited acculturation, and the way of maintaining and recreating Tibetan identity in exile are some of the elements that distinguish Tibetans concept of nation and nationalism from other refugees (Anand, 2000; Arakeri, 1998; Kolas, 1996).

Method

There are multiple views on the researchers' guidelines for sample size in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Mason, 2010). However, other studies have concluded that sampling strategies must be based on appropriateness and adequacy (Morse & Field, 1995), and an appropriate sample size is sufficient to adequately address the research question (Marshall, 1996; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Thus, for such purposes, 29 semi-structured interviews of Tibetan refugees (18 males and 11 females with an average age of 35) were conducted in three different spaces in India, namely, the Himalayan region, North India, and South India. The final sample size is ensured to be sufficient for addressing the research questions both appropriately and adequately. The inclusion criteria involved approaching Tibetan refugees who have been living in India for not less than 5 years, holding refugee certificates, and identifying themselves as belonging to Tibet, a nation that was formerly independent and now is under the occupation of the People's Republic of China. However, finding such individuals was not always possible; thus, the researchers employed the snowball sampling technique (Noy, 2008) and relied on a few participants' suggestions to identify other suitable participants for the present study. Since the study also examines the diversity of data collection sites (Bylakuppe, South India; Pandoh, Himalayan Region; and Sarnath, North India) and participants, the questions in the semi-structured interviews were tailored to balance the study context and capture the particularities of each site. For instance, the common questions asked in every site were related to national and refugee identity, depiction of a nation in imagination, present challenges in exile, the reason for cultural and religious preservation, how they contribute towards their community cause in everyday life, and the feeling of group efficacy. However, to cover Uprising Day 2023 – a Tibetan annual event that commemorates the 1959 Tibetan revolt against the Chinese rule in Lhasa, which led to the Dalai Lama's exile and the beginning of the Tibetan diaspora. We added more questions about the motivation for

participation in Uprising Day or their views on those Tibetan refugees who did not participate on that day.

Initially, we interviewed nine Tibetan refugees (four males and five females) residing in or near the Pandoh Tibetan settlement in Mandi district, Himachal Pradesh, North India, during the early summer of 2018. Then, during the late summer of 2018, we visited the Bylakuppe Tibetan settlement in the Mysore district of Karnataka, South India. Here, we took six (four males and two females) more interviews of Tibetans living inside or outside the Tibetan communities. In the final phase, we interviewed 14 Tibetan refugees (10 males and four females), including 13 students and one lecturer, from the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), Sarnath, in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, on the occasion of the 64th Tibetan Uprising Day scheduled on 10 March 2023.

The diversity of the data collection sites—Bylakuppe, Pandoh, and Sarnath—offers a comprehensive representation of the miscellaneous experiences within the Tibetan diaspora in India. Bylakuppe, one of the oldest, largest, and most established settlements in India, having political significance in governance-in-exile, proved essential for exploring the processes of socio-economic integration and cultural preservation in a stable and resource-rich environment among the exiled Tibetan community. Similarly, Pandoh, a smaller settlement in Himachal Pradesh, is essential for understanding how a community in a remote area, experiencing the challenges of rural livelihoods, maintains its sense of belonging to its national identity. Furthermore, Sarnath represents a perfect example of how the intersection of Tibetan refugee life with Buddhist religious and cultural values provides monastic experiences and educational opportunities, contributing to identity preservation and nurturing the minds of young people. The diversity of participants across these regions, which differ drastically in language and cultural background, illustrates the varied perspectives on intergenerational transitions of cultural, religious, and national characteristics, as well as the interwoven nature of imagination, national identity, and nationalism. Since the interviews were conducted in two languages (Hindi and English), the Hindi transcripts were translated into English and then again translated back to Hindi to ensure accuracy, which was accomplished manually. Also, the three researchers proofread all the translated interviews separately to check equivalency in the translation process.

The data was analysed using 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)' developed by Smith et al. (1999) to investigate how Tibetan refugees imagine their nation in exile and make sense of their ideas of nation and nationalism. Drawing on the two fundamental concepts of phenomenology and hermeneutics, IPA provides a qualitative method for exploring the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their major life experiences (Barton, 2020; Larkin et al., 2018). Phenomenology, developed into a proper methodological framework by Husserl and Heidegger (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), approaches understanding participants' direct experiences, making it suitable for investigating how Tibetan refugees imagine their nation, characterised by unparalleled geographical, cultural, and religious aestheticism. Hermeneutics pilots the interpretative process, where the researchers make sense of participants' accounts of lived experience while reflexively acknowledging their own influence on the analysis.

The data analysis process began with the transcription of each interview, which was then read multiple times to ensure an in-depth understanding of the data set. Analytical notes were initially recorded in the left margin of the transcripts, capturing detailed observations and reflections. Emerging themes were written in the right margin, using adequate labelling terms to highlight the essential aspects of the interview dialogue. Initial coding focused on descriptive and interpretive elements that contribute to the objective of the present work. This stage identifies themes such as 'faith in leadership,' 'cultural homogeneity,' 'geographical and traditional roots of identity,' 'feeling of

nationalism and identity-based relatedness/belongingness,' and feeling of non-belongingness based on refugee identity.' As the analysis progressed, themes were refined through merging and reorganisation. Subsequently, superordinate themes and their corresponding aspects were identified by identifying connectivity patterns among the emergent themes. Thus, the codes formed in the initial coding step were clustered into superordinate themes or final themes. Cognitive bias, rigour, and trustworthiness were maintained through transparent coding and reflective journaling (Yardley, 2000). As described by her, reflective journaling fosters critical self-awareness and transparency in qualitative research. It encourages researchers to examine their pre-conceived notions and values, and reflect upon how such cultural conditioning can influence the research process. Our data analysis revealed a common belief system regarding Tibetan socio-political questions shared by all our participants, regardless of whether they were from the Himalayan region of Mandi or were young Tibetan students at CIHTS, established in the plains of central India.

The arguments of our study are divided into five sections. The first section, '*(Re)imagining National Feature'*, talks about the imaginative and narrative features of Tibet as a nation with which our participants felt strongly aligned. The second section, '*Beholding Norms of National Traits*', discusses the personality characteristics that our participants believe make someone an authentic Tibetan. In the third section, '*National Leader: An Epitome of Hope*', we show the significance of the presence of His Holiness Dalai Lama for the continuation of Tibet's existence as an idea of a nation among our participants' mental schemes. The fourth section, '*National Consciousness: An Awareness of the Group Status and Objective*', discusses our participants' dilemma as a refugee group where, on the one hand, they belong to a well-defined nation and at the same time, their refugee-ness defines their reality of everyday life in exile, which further impacts what they believe and do for Tibet. The last section, '*Tibetans' Idea and Acts of Nationalism*', deals with the Tibetan version of nationalism reflected in what they think and do to contribute to their nation's wellness.

(Re)imagining National Features

Participants' reflections on their nation reveal a strong tendency to imagine and say a distinct national identity. They particularly emphasised the unique value of environmental factors and traditional wisdom, which they viewed as setting their nation apart from other countries. When asked, they envisioned Tibet in terms of its geographical and historical features, rather than through national stereotypes, such as the national emblem, among others. Participants depicted a version of Tibet in which they experienced a sense of belonging to a land rich in natural beauty. For instance, a 26-year-old university student from Bylakuppe expressed:

> Yeah! Tibet as a nation is very peaceful and loving, and its nature is purely aesthetic and very beautiful. It is a land of snow and mountains, filled with beautiful scenery. We heard a lot of stories about the beauty of Tibet, its forests, the animals and everything else. It is our motherland, the land of Tibetans.

Like him, other participants stressed that the geographical characteristics are remarkable and indicated it as a strengthening factor for nationalist sentiments and territorial desirability. Although the historical and geographical trajectories were mostly imagined or vividly recalled, the attributes ascribed by the participants were considered the most essential to Tibetan identity. A similar consciousness of geographical identification is observed in the writings of various Tibetan writers who often title their work highlighting the physical features of Tibet. For instance, the book title of Palden Gyatso (1998), "*Fire Under the Snow*" or Tsering Shakya (1999), "*The Dragon in the Land of Snows*", can be interpreted as a compensatory attempt to construct a national boundary by specifying the peculiarities of the homeland in response to its failure to develop a political nation before 1959.

Furthermore, the emotional attachment to their motherland was evident in their personal, religious, and social spheres. During the field visits, we were invited by many participants to their places, and we found that, in most cases, the photo frames of the Himalayas or Potala House were hung around the walls. For instance, it is evident from one of the observation notes maintained during the fieldwork in Sarnath on 17 March 2023.

> I was with the gatekeeper in his office. He was finishing some of his work. I noticed a photo frame of a mountain capped in snow placed on the gatekeeper's study table. I asked him:
>
> Interviewer: I want to ask you one thing. I have seen similar images of mountains and other landscapes depicting mountain ranges. Why is that?
>
> Gatekeeper: Yes, of course. This is one of the many popular mountains of Tibet; it is very beautiful and has a very high altitude. For me, especially, I connect with my country every day and every time I watch this photo.

Interestingly, geographical attachment is present in participants who have never been to their ancestral homeland. One such explanation is found in research on transgenerational memory, which suggests that cultural narratives and oral histories transmitted across generations allow exiled communities to sustain emotional bonds with their homeland and a desire to continue living with such a narrative inclination (Hirsch, 1997). It fulfils a critical psychological function, providing a sense of identity and belonging in exile. Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' (1983) explains how symbolic associations with the homeland's geographical features, such as Tibet's mountains symbolising mythical features, can validate a shared identity among refugees, even when deprived of direct physical experience.

In addition to describing the unique features of their motherland and feelings of attachment, participants also noted how this correlates with their common ancestry. Participants' assertions on common ancestry were mainly based on the narratives of the Bon religion. Most participants are convinced that even the present Tibetan identity is centred on Buddhism, the original Tibetan race descended from the Bon religion founded by Shrenab. These claims are evident from the response of a 37-year-old Rimpoche of the Bylakuppe settlement, who upholds the same belief.

> In the 8th century, Buddhists from India came to Tibet. At the beginning of the 8th century, a Buddhist monk, known as Padmasambhava, arrived from the Mandi or Manali region. He came to Tibet, and there was one monk who brought the Nalanda monastery and its monks to Tibet, introducing Buddhism to the region.

While expressing his feelings about Buddhism, the participant recognised it as his religious identity. Similarly, other participants' references to Buddhism imply homogeneity of practice, but assertions about common ancestry were made to accentuate distinctiveness and allow the construction of uniform features of their nation. Their identification with the narratives of common ancestry, common culture, and strong association with a motherland strengthens their sense of belonging to well-defined features of their nation, which is different from other Buddhist countries.

Beholding Norms of National Trait

Addressing the question, "Whom do Tibetans consider Tibetan?" becomes more significant than "Who are Tibetans?" in understanding their identification process at an intra-group level. A critical opinion was expressed by one of the female PhD scholars from the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), Sarnath, who provides a clear distinction between whom Tibetans considered Tibetans in the following words:

> Without our culture, without our language, we are not Tibetans. If I do not speak Tibetan, if I do not care about my culture, then I am not a Tibetan. I feel

> that way. So, if I meet you somewhere else, how would you describe me as a Tibetan if I do not even speak the Tibetan language? However, I can say I am Tibetan by blood, but I do not think that makes much sense if I do not have my own language. If we do not have our own culture, then I do not have anything, and I cannot say that I have any identity at all.

The above-expressed views point out the inflexibility with which the participant has defined her national identity and whom she considers truly Tibetan, which is an uncompromising negotiation. The statement "*Without our culture, without our language, we are not Tibetans*" reflects the belief that being Tibetan is not just about ancestry but also about actively practising Tibetan culture and speaking the language. The line "*If I don't speak Tibetan*, *I cannot say that I have any identity at all*" further indicates the language factor as a qualifying criterion for a genuine Tibetan identity, revealing a consistent trait of desire for connecting to the traditional roots. Similarly, the remark, "*I can say I am Tibetan by blood, but I don't think that makes much sense*," suggests that kinship alone is insufficient without cultural and linguistic practices. Such a fixed mindset reflects personality traits like pride in heritage, inclination towards ethnic purity, and a sense of responsibility toward preserving the community's cultural and traditional values.

Similarly, when we asked another 29-year-old female from the Bylakuppe settlement, "What makes you think you are a Tibetan?" she precisely understood 'Tibetan-ness' as:

> We have our own culture, our own History, our ancestors, and our own language. We have these things, and those who follow them will be considered Tibetan.

She further expresses:

> The characteristics of humble people, being down-to-earth, and compassion for others differentiate Tibetans from others.

Interestingly, whether the participants are from the Bylakuppe settlement or university students who live outside the refugee settlements, in their defining style and imagining of a nation, the participants still adhere to the idea of Tibet that existed before foreign interventions: Tibet, beyond materialism, within spirituality. It holds two implications; on the one hand, such individual belief structures allow them to imagine the national features most available for identification. On the other hand, it validates the essentials of normative fit in further assuming the national traits of its citizens. For instance, an India-born 47-year-old Tibetan male perceived Tibet through its primitive roots when asked, "As you said, Tibet is a kind of imaginary nation for you because you have not seen it, but you have seen the representations of Tibet. How do you feel about Tibet as your homeland?

> As a nation, Tibet is peaceful, and its natural environment is rich. All the people are very kind-hearted, and they believe in religion. They want to be kind to every living being, not only human beings but also to other creatures. There is no harm to each other. Other religions also exist in Tibet, and they coexist in harmony. There is no political pressure or anything; it is very peaceful and very loving.

Notably, the participant was born and raised in India and has yet to visit Tibet. Still, his views on Tibet as a nation and the shared traits of its citizens reveal an unwavering conviction. Other participants also recognised traits such as humility, compassion, altruism, and non-greediness as essential to the Tibetan personality.

National Leader: An Epitome of Hope

Thus far, our analysis highlights the physical and psychological features and attributes of 'Tibetan-ness' that are considered enduring and remain sustainable over time. The legitimacy of such group status also depends on the leadership instrumentality influencing social order in a community and managing the dynamics of social change (such as transitioning the concept of Tibet from a monarchical setup to

a democratic nation-state) for the collective good. Furthermore, faith and hope are two factors that moderate the relationship between a nation's leadership instrumentality and its coherent identification with the available definition and ideology of the nation. In this sense, addressing the role of His Holiness Dalai Lama becomes essential for understanding the cognitive and affective orientation of the participants' belief structure corresponding to their national movement.

We observed the symbolic presence of the Dalai Lama in every nook and corner of Tibetan culture during our fieldwork. Even on the Uprising Day 2023, a huge cutout of the Dalai Lama was placed in the middle of the Two Lions temple in Sarnath, where his message on the occasion of the event was supposed to be read. Such arrangements can also be seen as an effort to make the symbolic presence of the Dalai Lama omnipresent and to condition the minds of his devotees to perceive every political, social, or religious event in connection with the Dalai Lama's presence. A similar observation was also noted in our fieldwork during the summer of 2023 in Sarnath:

> Most likely on the last day of my fieldwork, and I am certain that I have not witnessed a single incident in which the Dalai Lama's symbolic presence (either through his photos, sculptures, or books) was absent. Like today itself, my gatekeeper, who has become a good friend, gifted me 'Freedom in Exile', a book written by the Dalai Lama, an envelope-sized photo of the Dalai Lama, and a Tibetan flag.

Such intense emotion is also explicitly reflected during the conversations. Participants internalise the symbolic presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as a 'living God', a God whose presence has not merely evolved from Buddha's reincarnation but also as an empathetic leader responsible for injecting meaning and sustaining welfare in the lives of Tibetans worldwide. While answering, a 29-year-old female student's explanation indicates the same in the following words:

> The majority of Tibetans project His Holiness as a living God. In a way, he is a human being, but we Tibetans believe he is a living Buddha or God. In practice, he has done some extraordinary things.

However, His Holiness's approaches not only foster the political and economic dimensions of an exiled community, but his symbolic presence also bridges the religious continuity between Tibetans under Chinese rule and those in exile. Thus, on the one hand, participants express how China's prohibition policy on worshipping His Holiness in Tibet brings grief in Tibetan life; on the other hand, such bans remain a significant factor in their escaping to India. A 37-year-old female from Mandi district asserted in the following words:

> Many Tibetans flee to India to study and learn the teachings of the Dalai Lama. There are monks and lamas in Tibet, too, but they do not get the chance to learn the preaching of the Dalai Lama, like here in India; religious studies are not that good back in China. Thus, many Tibetans come to India to study in Karnataka [one of the states of South India] as they want to study Buddhism and Tibetan religion under the supervision of the Dalai Lama.

Elaborating on such feelings, the exiled community serves as a space for newly arrived refugees to rediscover their sense of nationhood through exercising religious and cultural freedom under the symbolic presence of His Holiness. These motivational drives are seminal in addressing the leadership influences in developing feelings of solidarity and connectedness among a dispersed population. For instance, a participant's extra effort to say '*most importantly*' in the following extract provides perspective to such arguments.

> We have a common language, religion, and culture, and most importantly, our faith in the Dalai Lama connects us as Tibetans.

Another 29-year-old female participant living in the Bylakuppe settlement identified another perspective while explaining his faith in the

leadership strategy of His Holiness for gaining Tibet's solution. The subsequent response highlights a transfer of psychological phenomena, where the participant's strong identification with a national character (His Holiness the Dalai Lama) transforms into an unquestionable faith associated with the policies adopted by such characters to benefit the in-group status.

> I am sure that slowly and steadily, we can get Tibet's freedom because China is a populist country with the largest population in the world. They are a powerful country, and Tibet is a small country. Like Gandhi Ji did for India through truth and nonviolence, His Holiness is doing the same thing for Tibet. This way we can get our own country. For example, through the middle way, we are engaging in a dialogue between China, Tibet, and India, and we can regain our country within a few years.

Even such brief extracts provide a definitive account of the interviewees' faith and expectations from His Holiness. Such expectations correspond to a two-fold dimension. First, they position their reference to the Godly persona (Buddha's reincarnation) while explaining the relevance of His Holiness regarding cultural and religious survival. Second, by comparing his leadership skills to those of a human while imagining the future of Tibet from a socio-political perspective. Thus, it enables participants to perceive the dynamics of His Holiness's leadership policies as being in the best interest of their nation's past, present, and future.

National Consciousness: An Awareness of the Group Status and Objective

The participant's strong identification with cultural and religious values, as well as the Dalai Lama's symbolic presence, helped maintain intergroup differences. It also facilitated perceiving the utilitarian value of identifying with these distinctions. Such utilitarian values are drawn from the participant's nationalist sentiments as they interact more intensely with the idea of Tibet as a nation than as a geographical space, in a priest-patron relationship with the outside world. Further, this divides our participants' perception of Tibet into two dimensions: first, a nation of ethnic richness, and second, the same nation suffering from being deprived of its legal status and striving to seek identity validation from the out-group members.

Participants' words highlight how they, at an intragroup level, associate a sense of pride with their belonging to Tibet. However, at the same time, they suffer from an identity crisis when comparing their national status with that of other nations. When we asked, "What do you think about your identity?" a 47-year-old male participant explained the need for an identity in an individual's life in the following words:

> As human beings, we need an identity. Yes! We need an identity. For example, whether we are Tibetan, Indian, American, or from any other background, we should have an identity. If there is an identity, there is a proud feeling, Oh! I am Tibetan and have my own country, so this is the right way. However, right now, our country and our identity are suppressed by the Chinese government. We have to struggle for that one. Not only the refugees who came to India or some other country, but we also need to identify with our own Tibetan identity. People living in Tibet need that identity.

At first glance, this participant's response suggests that the distress in his life stems from being denied a fundamental right to have a nation of his own, as such conflicts have brought about a sense of identity crisis among the participants. However, further elaborating on these feelings, it can be understood that an identity crisis also signifies the consciousness of not being recognised by the out-group members. He continued with such unsettling feelings in the following way:

> We need our freedom back. Our nation should be free from other countries' occupation, from China! We need

> freedom, and we need an identity for our own community. They have to recognise Tibet as an Independent country so that we have our own identity. It is very necessary.

Here, the felt need to attain freedom from the Chinese occupation does not simply explain a desire for a validated identity but also the hardship that follows from the lack of it in an exiled land living a refugee's life. Another 34-year-old female participant, who runs a shop in the Mandi district, shared a different perspective on her refugee experience in India. We asked her, "How do you feel about living in India?" and she replied:

> It feels good to live in India. But we do have one problem. We find it very difficult to find places to settle. We cannot buy land. We do not have our own home. We live in houses for rent. It is difficult for us to live on rent; where we live, people will disturb us by saying, leave this house and all, and then increase the rent, making it more difficult for us.

In addition to sharing a feeling of instability and unownedness (here, unownedness is used to signify a sense marked by a helpless feeling of owing nothing), she also showed concern about the lack of opportunities for economic growth and the future of refugee youths in an exiled state. She continued:

> We are many. We do not have jobs. Children are also present, studying, and after some time, they will grow up and have to find employment. However, in India, they cannot secure government jobs; instead, they will obtain only private sector jobs. Nowadays, private jobs do not pay that much.

The lived experiences of Tibetan refugees in exile reveal another dimension, where their national pride and sense of security in identifying with Tibet are challenged by the realities of their 'refugeeness' (Dobson, 2004). Stephen Dobson conceptualises refugeeness as a condition of being a refugee, not just as a legal or political status but as an embodied and lived reality shaped by displacement, lack of recognition, legal issues, a sense of temporality, and a longing for home. For Tibetan refugees, this consciousness encompasses the daily negotiations of identity, memory, and belonging, which shape their exile experience. Further, Tibetan refugees live in a state where their cultural and political existence is both preserved and reconstructed in exile to a degree that it started looking more real than Tibet itself. It provides a glimpse into the past of Tibet before China's annexation. However, it also creates a divided consciousness among these refugees, where their aspirational identity as Tibetans, ingrained in their traditional attributes, conflicts with their lived reality as refugees facing marginalisation and uncertainty. The divided state of Tibetan refugees highlights the struggle between a 'desired self,' tied to the concept of a free Tibet, and an 'actual self,' shaped by the constraints of displacement, which eventually reveals the unreliability of self-categorisation in diasporic contexts, where national pride coexists with the alienation of exile.

Tibetan Ideas and Acts of Nationalism

Nationalism as a phenomenon corresponds concomitantly to two objective polarities of an exclusive project, namely, 'for' and 'against,' and identifying both forces is identically significant. Most participants stated that their actions were intended to benefit their group members and to combat injustice. For instance, a male participant from Mandi district expressed:

> Nationalism? For me, it is like... it's two things together. It's being for my people and also against what is wrong. For example, we do many things to keep our culture alive, such as teaching children the Tibetan language and hosting Losar (New Year) celebrations. This is for us, for our future. Nevertheless, when we march on Tibetan Uprising Day or talk about what happened to Tibet, this is against injustice. Both are important, you know? If we fight only to forget who we are, then what are we fighting for? Moreover, if we only focus on ourselves

> and do not speak about the injustice, then how will the world know? It is like two sides of one coin, and they must go together.

Here, the participant's narration highlights a duality in his understanding of Tibetan nationalism as it corresponds to both the preservation of cultural identity ('for') and resistance against systemic injustice ('against'). Such duality in viewpoints also aligns with Kymlicka's (2001) framework of 'internal cultural cohesion' and 'external political advocacy,' which emphasises the dual strategies among marginalised groups to sustain their identity while resisting external forces of domination or assimilation.

Furthermore, a tone of compulsion is evident in the expression that citizens of Tibet are morally and ethically obliged to fulfil their national duties. A 71-year-old lecturer of the CIHTS narrated this in the following words:

> Every Tibetan has to contribute, has to participate, and has to sacrifice to continue the struggle according to their capability, their age, and their social ability, and so everybody's contribution is, of course, necessary and even today, those Tibetans in Tibet under the Chinese rule cannot outwardly do anything. Still, inside the depths of their mind, they have a strong wish and hope for a better light at the end of the tunnel, and every day, they, too, remember in their mind that they do not celebrate together; they cannot get together and say like this but those Tibetans outside, those diaspora Tibetans, no matter where they are, they can contribute to free Tibet.

When asked about their particular reasons for struggling for a nation they had never visited, the participants hold that they are happy in exile as individuals because they are provided with most of the necessities of life. However, when thinking as a nationalist, they think about their nation and their fellow Tibetans who suffer and the emotions they feel for them, making them connect to the idea of Tibet as a nation. These group-based emotions lead to the development of their feelings for Tibet along emotional pathways that consistently motivate them to contribute to their national cause, based on moral judgments and societal norms.

In interviews, most participants believe that peaceful political protest is an effective way to attract the world's attention and strengthen their national movement. However, some participants disagree and have preferences for more radical approaches. They are discontent with the passivity involved in present political protests that should be made more radical (through implementing necessary changes in the existing social and political order of the Tibetan government-in-exile to organise active political protest strategies) to increase the effectiveness. Besides political protests, participants also advocate for economic contributions and cultural and religious advertisements to substantiate their mobilisation process.

> Through our education, whether it is in economics or a cause related to the Tibetan people, this is one way we can contribute a little to our country. In a way, we are supporting our cause; in another way, we are participating in it. So this is what I have felt. Most of the Tibetans happily agree when there are protests or marches because to represent themselves as Tibetans, this is a holy chance for every Tibetan to participate in every kind of thing.

The participant shares that as a child of Tibet, they must support their nation and its natives in all possible ways. The researched participants believe that collective actions executed through all possible but democratic mediums are the best way to achieve independence. The participants' perception of participation in such activities as a choice rather than an obligation satisfies their sense of responsibility as Tibetans.

Discussion and Conclusion

Seton Watson (2019) asserts that no scientific definition of a nation can ever be devised. The elements of a nation that remain leitmotif and iterative are language, history, territory, and common ancestry. The present work adopts a

focused approach to understanding the social-psychological dimensions of a nation, its trajectories, and how it shapes an individual's imaginative scheme. Thus, it discusses the concept of nation and nationalism by considering those pieces of literature that treat these concepts as social artefacts. In this view, we explored the imaginative and constructive features of the idea of Tibet among Tibetan refugees and its sentimental and behavioural aspects reflected in their version of nationalism.

Constructing national features involves defining a nation among the Tibetans through which they identify and categorise themselves based on their shared values and traditions. Most participants reported that they connected with their idea of Tibet as a nation through its Tibetan culture, language, territory, Buddhist religion, and its leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Even though shared culture and beliefs are essential for individuals to identify with their nation (De Cillia et al., 1999), the reliance on imagination, national sentiments, and nationalist strategies forms a basis that distinguishes the Tibetan identification process from that of other communities. Their identification process mainly occurs outside the homeland, which is comparatively more complicated and depends solely on imagination. Generally, national identity is considered a given; however, this is not the case for Tibetan refugees. Before the Chinese invasion, Tibetan identity was assumed to have a different status (Kolas, 1996), where religion and politics were entangled, and national identity was taken for granted. After the exile, the Tibetan national identity emerged as socially and politically constructed (Anand, 2000, 2003). Various accounts from participants' interviews affirm Anand's (2000) perspective on the Tibetan-ness of their national identity. From the participants' accounts, it was clear that constant comparison with the out-groups is also a motivating factor that keeps Tibetan national identity distinct and alive in exile. The exact sense of belonging transforms into a feeling of nationalism, which makes them come together as a group to protest against their common enemy, the Chinese. Similarly, the use of '*family*' metaphors in many responses stresses the strong sense of oneness that Tibetans share with their ingroup members based on their national identity, irrespective of geographical boundaries and proximity factors. The need for recognition is also an essential factor derived from interviews. For example, a participant expressed concern that Tibet not being recognised as a nation by others would weaken their political position and put them at a disadvantage in negotiations.

Furthermore, the study examines the characteristics of national community representatives and the strategies employed by prototypes to represent a nation at various stages and contexts. The representatives are supposed to be the inheritors of the national community or a common ancestry who share the most intrinsic characteristics of a nation that can be projected as an example of prototypicality. In this regard, the Dalai Lama stands as a category prototype of the Tibetan community, and people worldwide recognise this community based on His Holiness's religious and human traits.

Existing literature has asserted that a nation should possess three fundamental criteria: national identity, national autonomy, and national unity to attain the status of the national community (Smith & Smith, 2003). However, the Tibetans in exile have primarily focused on national identity and unity, with a significant element missing: national autonomy, which they have been fighting for over the past few decades. The decades-long Tibetan protest for the autonomy of their homeland opened a different way of looking at a nation. Even though China has annexed Tibet on the grounds of liberating it from the feudal forces and renamed Tibet - Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), the refugees' account of fleeing from Tibet through the dangerous routes of the Himalayan range and the cases of self-immolation (Woeser, 2016) suggest otherwise. Challenging Smith's concept of nation, the Tibetan exiled community has shown that the national community can continue to exist as an imaginative aspect (even in the absence of national autonomy— both in Tibet and as the diaspora) if there is a strong sense of national identity and national unity

mediated through a strong faith in the leadership among its identifiers. The mentioned phenomena will continue to depict national commitment in various ways, through participation in protests or preservation of the nation's attributes, as well as through every little and big effort Tibetans make to maintain the essence of their virtual nation.

Earlier research has also examined the Tibetans' struggle for a nation, primarily from a social and political perspective, overlooking the role of the individual in the entire process. For instance, Amalendu Misra (2003) has examined the dynamics of long-distance nationalism, arguing that diasporic nationalism does not grow in isolation but rather strengthens in collaboration with the political forces within Tibet. However, the revised policies of China for Tibet following the cases of self-immolation in 2008 have adversely impacted the strategy of long-distance nationalism, and the contemporary situation of Tibetan nationalism in exile faces a cooperative crisis with Tibet. Here, the role of 'self' or 'group of individuals' becomes essential to understand the reasons for longevity in the exiled Tibetans' struggle movement. For instance, a prominent factor found in the voices of the studied population is the absence of proximity among in-group members. Looking at the refugee status worldwide, one can observe that being together with family or their respective groups is difficult at times, especially when it is a political displacement; the hardship increases. In the case of Tibetans, the displacement caused the refugees to disperse into various settlements with profound differences in cultural backgrounds. For example, the local environment of the Bylakuppe settlement in South India is entirely different from that of North Indian settlements in terms of culture, language, and customs. Similarly, some Tibetans who live in Western countries experience different cultural setups. Nevertheless, the participants maintained their sense of belonging even in such dispersed settings. The interview extracts depict how this togetherness is guided by their national identity in the absence of proximity factors. Wherever the Tibetans may be, they feel strongly tied to a single identity - that of being Tibetan, which allows them to imagine themselves as part of a broad community that shares the same culture, values, language, and traditions. The physical expression of this imagination takes the form of observing their rituals, speaking their language, maintaining their faith, and protesting for their nation.

In summary, by studying the lived experiences of Tibetan refugees, we attempted to illustrate how the implications of the psychological idea of a nation and behavioural aspects of nationalism help us understand the psychological process among refugees to bring a new perspective in imaginative aspects in the construction of an idea of nation and development of national consciousness available for its identifier to internalise amid statelessness. Here, the leader's task is to develop more unified nation trajectories, including symbolic, narrative, and administrative functional complementarity. Such strategic concerns introduce realistic elements in an individual's imagination of a nation to identify. Investigating the sentiments of nationalism among a refugee population finds a shared objective that transforms the multiplicity of identities into intrinsically defined acts of nationalism, capturing the essence of Tibetan refugees' existence in exile.

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