



(Re)imagining nationalism: identity and representation in the Tibetan diaspora of South Asia¹

DIBYESH ANAND

ABSTRACT *In this article the focus is on various embodied and embedded narratives shaping Tibetan identity today, especially among the diasporic Tibetans living in South Asia. It is argued that it is not only Westerners who have exoticised Tibet and the Tibetans; the Tibetan diaspora too have invested heavily in such (neo)orientalist representation strategies for their own tactical purposes. The first part of the article is devoted to the conceptual issues involved, including the question of identity, nationalism and diaspora. The second part deals with various dynamics and factors shaping the discourse of 'Tibetanness' in the diaspora community. The third part concludes with observations that challenge assumptions about a single discourse of Tibetanness.*

In this era of post-modernism and post-colonialism, if there is a name that conjures up visions of mystery and fantasy, of spirituality and exotica, it is Tibet.² Serious works on Tibet often portray it as a Shangri-La on the verge of extinction; a semi-colony with its unique culture being destroyed by the Chinese (and/or the process of modernisation). In such pessimistic scenarios, what is ignored is the creative potential of Tibetan people themselves to adjust and survive in a changing world. The story of the creation of the Tibetan community-in-exile illustrates the successful strategies of Dalai Lama-led government to foster and maintain a distinctive national identity among disparate groups of people from various parts of greater Tibet³ with mix of religious, cultural and political elements. This success has not been an unmixed blessing, for the contributory factors behind it also limit the vocabularies available for expressing Tibetan political identity.

In this article, the focus is on various embodied and embedded narratives shaping Tibetan identity today, especially among the diasporic Tibetans living in

Correspondence: Dibyesh Anand, Department of Politics, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK. Email: D.Anand@bris.ac.uk.

South Asia. Rather than take identity as an ontological imperative, a discursive approach considering identity as a process as well as a product is adopted. Here, the concern is not with the factors affecting lives of individual Tibetans in South Asia, but with those tensions which play constitute and performative roles in the prevalent identity discourse within the Tibetan diaspora community-at-large (the bulk of whom live in South Asia). It is argued that it is not only Westerners who have exoticised Tibet; the Tibetans of the diaspora also have invested heavily in such (neo)orientalist representations strategies for their own tactical purposes. The first part of this paper is devoted to the conceptual issues involved, including the question of identity, nationalism and diaspora. The second part deals with various dynamics and factors shaping the discourse of 'Tibetanness' in the diaspora. The third part concludes with observations that challenge assumptions about a single discourse of Tibetanness.

Though no exact statistics are available on the Tibetan refugee population, it can be stated with relative certainty that out of around 130,000 refugees, more than 95% live in the South-Asian States of India, Nepal and Bhutan.⁴ A significant number of Tibetan refugees live in approximately 54 settlements throughout the region. While half of these settlements are agrarian-based, especially those in south and central India, others have handicrafts and small business as their economic base. More than two-thirds of the refugee population is from U-Tsang (central Tibet). Around a quarter of the population is from Kham (east Tibet), and only a small minority is from Amdo (northeast Tibet).⁵ While a majority consists of those who either migrated soon after the Dalai Lama sought refuge in India in 1959, or are the descendants of the first generation refugees, a small but significant proportion of the population consists of more recent refugees. A few thousand Tibetans continue to flee Chinese-controlled Tibet every year, a fact that largely goes unnoticed in the international media. (The recent arrival of the young Karmapa in India and the wide media coverage of it is certainly an exception to this, given his high status within the Tibetan religious hierarchy.)

This continuing flow of refugees adds to the strain on existing resources of the Tibetan administration-in-exile, increases the incidence of tension between old refugees and the newly arrived ones, and is not looked upon favourably by various host governments. Spatial distribution, economic differentiation, regional and sectarian backgrounds, generational gaps; all of these structural forces compound the category of diasporic Tibetan. Thus, a unified, homogenous Tibetan-in-exile identity is more of a rhetorical device and imaginary construct than some verifiable reality. At the same time, it is naïve to dismiss any consideration of the identity question on this ground only, for all identities are, in the last instance, products of the imagination. It is also important to explore the dynamics shaping the choice and the use of rhetorical devices, since they have a deep impact on the real lives of the people. Though Tibetanness is an imagined and contested construct, it has its own effect on those who consider themselves Tibetans.

Identity, nationalism and diaspora: some conceptual clarifications

Rather than taking identity as something given, one should consider it as socially and politically constructed: 'Identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorisation by others ... (it) is a creolized aggregate composed through bricolage.'⁶ A discursive approach does not deny any act of communal political activism. It only reveals it as contingent, as strategic rather than something unambiguously natural. Identification should be seen, not as an artefact or an outcome, but as a construction, a process never completed. Identities are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.⁷ While one can appreciate the common political practice of espousing one's claim in uninterrogated and essentialist terms, one should distinguish these political claims from their problematic theoretical underpinnings.

Applying this idea to the Tibetan case, one may see Tibetan identity as constituted by particular processes and practices, and not as some universal, timeless fixed thing. The question of Tibetan identity should not be seen as one of simple historical investigation of an already existing entity. Instead, one should explore various ontological and epistemological themes involved in the deployment of the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming (rather than being) a Tibetan. Given the structure of the imagined community of nations, it is not surprising that the Tibetan elite espouse their cause in terms of essentialist notion of nationalism. Since nationalism itself is a particularised discourse of collective identity, a discursive approach may be extended to a discussion of Tibet as a nation and Tibetanness as a narrative of national identity. Tibet, in this sense, is an 'imagining community'.⁸ A unified Tibetan nation currently exists only through the anticipated (re)construction of its parts: occupied country, dispersed communities and globally networked politico-cultural support system (Tibet support groups).⁹ At the same time, as argued earlier, the recognition of the contingency of identity does not preclude the vital importance of affirmations of essential subjectivity in forging of national identity.

The study of Tibetan national identity should be placed within wider theoretical debates over nationalism. In the rhetoric of nationalism, what is ignored is that the need to present one's own community as a nation is a modern day phenomenon. More often than not, the proponents of nationalism take a primordialist view of nationalism. Nationalist movements in most places trace their genealogy to antiquity. Such a view has been rightly contested in the academic discourse on nationalism,¹⁰ and it has been argued that 'invented traditions'¹¹ are used to create 'imagined communities'.¹² Nationalism is seen as a theory of legitimacy, 'a political principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.'¹³ At the same time, the 'instrumentalist' scholars of nationalism are often accused of over-emphasising the capacity of nationalism as

an ideology to engender nations. Anthony Smith, for instance, has argued that modern nationalism crucially depends on its primordial ethnic past.¹⁴

However, as the Tibetan case shows, a better approach would be to retain scepticism about the primordality of the past and situate oneself somewhere in-between the instrumentalist–primordialist debate, adopting a more diversified and inclusive understanding of nationalism which highlights rather than obscures its cross-cultural variants. While the centrality of the process of imagination in constituting a nation is noteworthy, the existence of an archive¹⁵ from which this process draws resources is also undeniable. While this archive shapes the imagined community, the process of imagination not only draws upon an existing archive, but in the process recreates it. These aspects of overdetermination can be seen in the discourse of Tibet as a historical nation.

Historically, the political control of the Dalai Lama did not exceed beyond U-Tsang (now the Tibet Autonomous Region), while Kham and Amdo (now part of Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gangsu and Yunan) were ruled by various small principalities with often overlapping influence. Melvyn Goldstein's distinction between 'political' and 'ethnographic' Tibet is helpful here.¹⁶ While political Tibet was U-Tsang, the boundary of ethnographic Tibet extended to include Amdo and Kham. What bound the people in the regions was not an allegiance to one temporal authority, but certain commonalities of culture and religion. These elements may be seen as forming the basis of Tibetan 'ethnie', if one follows Anthony Smith's characterisation of ethnic community. Some of the features which he includes in this are a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, a shared memory of rich ethnohistory (especially of a golden age), differentiating elements of a common culture, an association with specific homeland and, lastly, a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of population.¹⁷ All these common identity elements were present in varying degrees in the history of Tibetans.

However, it is the interaction with modernity and colonialism that gave definite political meaning to the common identity elements. Contemporary expressions of Tibetanness is, in this sense, more a product of the processes of modernisation, colonialism and displacement, than of some historical nation. For instance, the claim of the Dharmasala establishment to be the rightful speaker of all Tibetans reflects the inner politics of the diasporic community and not some historical 'truth'. Here, the refugees—from all parts of Tibet and belonging to different sects of Tibetan Buddhism—have tended to present a more or less common front under the figure of the Dalai Lama.¹⁸ Had it not been for factors including Chinese colonial rule, the forces of modernity, the salience of nation-states in the international community, and the experience of exile, Tibetanness could have taken a radically different form.

An authoritarian state apparatus in Tibet, combined with censorship of information, ensures that Tibetan nationalism is far more developed in the diasporic community. The discourses of international human rights, democracy, decolonisation and self-determination have allowed sophisticated articulations of national identity among Tibetans in exile. The idea in the world media of what

constitutes Tibetanness often comes from the discursive practices of the exile community. The Tibetan national imagination is a product/process of strategic essentialism, oriented towards the goal of reclaiming homeland.

An important point of clarification regarding the use of the term 'diaspora' may be made here. As the scholarly discourse of dispersion has shifted to diaspora, the pain and suffering of a diaspora's forced migration/exile is often ignored. In the Tibetan case, it needs to be kept in mind that the term diaspora, apart from several other themes, denotes processes of flight, enforced migration, identity fragmentation and reconstruction, transnationalism and the goal of returning back to homeland. The last theme is the most problematic one since there is a growing realisation among the migrant population that the goal of returning to Tibet is too far-fetched in the foreseeable future. However, instead of diminishing their longing for the homeland, this realisation seems to have increased the importance of the construct of homeland. Indeed, the intensified yearning for the homeland functions as a therapeutic for many who know they may never return.¹⁹ The Tibetan diaspora should be seen as a particular social form, a type of consciousness and a mode of cultural production.²⁰ As a social group, Tibetans in South Asia continue to live as refugees and avoid assimilation into the host societies. In terms of consciousness, the sense of being a refugee is affirmed as patriotism in order to emphasise the desire of returning to Tibet. The cultural life of Tibetans in the diaspora reflects this affirmation of the status and the desire to return.

In sum, instead of treating concepts such as identity, nationalism and diaspora as something given, one should treat them as contested and problematic. The diasporic Tibetan identity formation should be studied in terms of political and cultural processes and discursive practices.

Factors affecting the discourse of Tibetanness in the diaspora

Tibetanness, as many observers of Tibetan diasporic community realise,²¹ is highly contested, and pluralistic identity formation and attempts at reification are bound to fail. Discussions must take into account that Tibetanness is articulated, in theory and in praxis, at several hierarchical as well as overlapping levels. It is a discursive product of many complementary and contestory dynamics such as: the policy pronouncements of Dharamsala; the politics of more radical elements; representational, gendered and generational practices; strategies of the 'Tibet movement';²² etc. Several factors influence and shape Tibetness, including: their refugee status; space-time projections of homeland, the overriding need for the preservation of their culture; the Western audience's preconceived notions of Tibet and Tibetans; the community's self-perception; the personality of Dalai Lama; the attitude of host governments and, most importantly; the desire to project a sense of continuity in a changing external environment.

Refugee status and the politics of patriotism

Since isolation is hardly a viable choice for most migrant communities (and individuals) when faced with the problem of adjusting in the host society, the Tibetan establishment opted for a policy of limited acculturation as opposed to assimilation. In a multinational state, certain versions of mainstream culture are bound to be dominant, and the minority cultures always have to negotiate with it. In South Asia, Tibetans have had to deal with the forces of popular Indian culture that are, in turn, always in negotiation with the globalised Western culture. While influences of popular Indian culture, including Bollywood, are marked among the Tibetan refugees, a sense of separate and distinct identity is prevalent. Though the political reality of the prevalence of a mainstream culture in a state cannot be ignored, it has been differently negotiated and resisted by different people. Both in rhetoric as well as in practice, the Tibetan refugee community, has largely avoided the process of 'Sanskritisation' that affects most minority groups in India.

This relative success in resisting assimilation into the host society has been largely due to the internal dynamics of the diaspora community, especially their refugee status which symbolises continued allegiance to Tibet. The retention of refugee status rather than the taking-up of the citizenship of the host country is seen as a highly patriotic act, especially since their refugee status severely restricts the right of Tibetans to own immovable property. For instance, even in McLeodganj, the 'Little Lhasa of India', most of the big hotels and commercial establishments are owned by Indians. The maintenance of refugee status has also been rationalised in terms of its compatibility with traditional principles. In Christiaan Klieger's analysis of Tibetan nationalism as a modern manifestation of 'patron-client dyad', it is argued that the refugees have been able to retain their status by converting the whole exile community as belonging to client category.²³

There is a growing network of aid agencies, monastic missions abroad and individual Western tourists that operates with Dharamsala as its centre. This, along with the capacity of Tibetans to carve out their own economic niches with spill-over effects for the local community has helped the Tibetans to avoid assimilating into the host society. In Nepal and north India, Tibetans have cornered a large share of the tourism industry. Elsewhere, they concentrate more on specialised craft industries. A seasonal Lhasa market is a common site in the Indian cityscapes. Rather than competing with the local Indians or Nepalese over scarce resources, Tibetans have often established new enterprises. This does not mean that the relationship between the refugees and the locals is totally harmonious. The perception of Tibetans as relatively well-off as compared to poor Indians/Nepalese in the locality has generated envy and jealousy. For instance, in the Majnu-ka-tilla settlement in north Delhi, the seemingly small issue of beer-brewing often generates tension within the locality. Local politicians have often found it easy to channel this resentment into support for their xenophobia. The case of the Dharamsala riots in the early 1990s revealed the

precarious position of the Tibetans, despite their immense contribution to the tourism and the economy of the region. As a recent riot in Manali showed, there are potential troublespots that still need to be addressed by Tibetan community leaders as well as the Indian/Nepali establishments.

Tibet as the imagined homeland

A particular space–time projection of homeland is another constitutive factor in the fostering of Tibetan identity in the diaspora. Place, real or imagined, has become a central metaphor for the identity construction in exile.²⁴ The projection of Dharamsala as the ‘Little Lhasa of India’ and the nomenclature of establishments here illustrates the need to create familiarity in a strange environment, and maintain the memory of homeland. This diasporic longing for homeland is reflected in expressive artistic production in the refugee community. Images of places from Tibet, such as Potala, are a favourite motif in cultural artefacts. While tourism and commodification are important factors behind the inclusion of the theme of place within the artistic production of the diaspora, one cannot deny the symbolic significance of Tibet as a homeland.

For the older generation of refugees, the homeland is the place where they once lived. For later generations of refugees, the homeland is, in certain sense, not a real place; it is a utopia. For them, the longing is for a home where they never inhabited. But the ‘memory’ and nostalgia is still there as they grew up hearing about Tibet. This nostalgia for a particular space is complemented by nostalgia for a particular time. It is not contemporary Tibet, but pre-1959 Tibet, frozen in time, which defines the longing. Commentators have noted how young diasporic Tibetans have mixed feelings when they visit Tibet for the first time; happiness and excitement is often tempered by alienation as Tibet today does not seem to be the idyllic homeland they were conditioned to dream about. However, it may be noted that this feeling of belongingness tempered with alienation seems to be a common phenomenon among most migrants. ‘Migration is a one way trip. There is no “home” to go back to.’²⁵

The rhetoric of return

A corollary to the particularised space–time projection of homeland is the theme of the desire to return. This theme of return to homeland is common to many diaspora communities. To place the issue of Tibet in a comparative perspective, one may compare the imagination of Tibet as a homeland with the experiences of another community of refugees; the Palestinians. In both the cases, one sees how the longing for home has changed over time, from return to specific villages and particular dwellings, to an emphasis on a collective national return to a homeland conceived more abstractly. In exile, there occurs a displacement of a community, once understood as being rooted in particular localities, to the level of the nation.²⁶ Like the Palestinians, the Tibetans conceive a common homeland as a moral as well as geographical location. Overall, the role of memory is

central to imagining Tibet as a nation among the refugees. Recreating and preserving memories of Tibet is crucial for maintaining the vision of 'Free Tibet' as a common cause. These memories also provide the tools of expression, the language and the idioms of Tibetan unity and identity. The desire to return is also encapsulated in the symbolic geography of Dharamsala where the temporariness of exile is emphasised.

The preservation of traditional culture in exile

The attempt to nurture and preserve traditional culture is another dynamic which shapes the discourse of Tibetan identity. The theme of preservation is evident in the culturoscape of various Tibetan settlements. One can find reproductions of many major sites/monuments of Lhasa (Tsuglagkhan, Norbulingka, etc.) in the Dharamsala region. Many important monasteries and nunneries have been 're-established' outside Tibet to save the Tibetan religion and culture from complete destruction. Unlike in Tibet, where the monastic institutions were the sole custodian of religion, in the diaspora, the task of preserving the culture is shared by modern institutions established by the administration-in-exile, including museums, institutes and libraries. The institutionalised expression of the preservation of culture is best found in the Norbulingka Institute, dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture in both its literary and artistic form. Particular ideas of Tibet and a range of cultural practices and institutions also are created and embedded in exhibitionary forms. Often, the religious motifs are dominant in such productive displays of 'authentic' Tibetan identity. As Ashild Kolas argues, 'contained within secular institutions, religious expressions have become the objects of Tibetan culture, which represent Tibetan identity to the outside world'.²⁷ This attempt to preserve traditional culture in the modern world has inevitably led to a secularisation and objectification of it.

One needs to keep in mind the complex web of meanings associated with culture and tradition, even when they are museumified and institutionalised. The traditionality is as much a result of conscious elite strategy as it is of *habitus*.²⁸ The category of tradition itself is dependent upon the category of modern. It is only under the forces of modernity that some practices that are part of a community's life become packaged as its essential traditional culture. What counts as tradition and what does not is highly contestable. The meaning of material objects within museums is always highly problematic. Though they come out of a particular history, they are at the same time stripped of their specificity and presented as timeless.²⁹ The entire project of preserving a culture and civilization is theoretically problematic since it considers culture as something that can be identified, mapped, practised and preserved. Such a conceptualisation of culture essentialises and naturalises what is socially and politically constructed and contested. Cultural identities, far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, are actually subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Tibetan culture is as much a process as it is a product of particular historical processes.

At the same time, it should be recognised that, even though emphasis within Tibetan diaspora is on traditional culture, space for explicitly more contemporary endeavours is also made available. For instance, though the catalogues and brochures of the Norbulingka Institute ‘forget’ to mention this, they have a section where young artists work on contemporary themes. Moreover, even traditional cultural practices are often laden with contemporary political meanings. For example, the dolls made in the traditional style at the Norbulingka carry ‘Free Tibet’ badges. One must consider not only the ways in which politics may affect works of art, but also in what sense an artwork may itself constitute a political statement. Examples from the Tibetan diaspora indicate that, rather than seeing culture as informing politics and vice versa, the entire category of culture may be understood as political. For instance, the very desire of preserving a culture under threat is an act of resistance by Tibetan refugees to dominant forces of modernity, as well as to Chinese statecraft.

We need to look at Tibetan cultural and political identity as intricately connected, and to guard against any simplistic generalisation about the Tibetan identity discourse.

Commodification

An ongoing process of the commodification of cultural processes and artefacts has facilitated the objectification of Tibetan culture. It also informs the construction, maintenance, and expression of a distinct Tibetan identity in exile. This commodification of Tibetan material as well as artistic production has been in response to a growth in tourism, both local and Western, and an expansion in the market for ‘ethnic’ goods. Robert Wood argues that tourism affects not only ‘the ways in which ethnic identities are asserted, but also which ethnic markers are chosen to symbolise group membership and culture’.³⁰ In the Tibetan case, while Frank Korom has shown the impact of this commodification on material production,³¹ Maria Calkowski³² and Mona Schrempf³³ have discussed the effect this commodification has had on performing arts such as *cham*. For instance, the performances of traditional Tibetan opera have been shortened to suit a Western audience’s taste and schedules are often decided according to the tourist season.

The Tibetan case is not unique since, in most parts of the world, the logic of market forces in the form of demand has led to a cannibalising of traditional culture.³⁴ At the same time one should be aware that the very same people who are essentialised often reappropriate the commodified goods for their own tactical purposes. Given the limited option Tibetans have for soliciting support for their cause, their appropriation of the commodification process is more of a tactic than a strategy. Tactics involve seizing propitious moments and space of the other and turning them to one’s own ends, thus making them opportunities. On the other hand, strategies imply that people have at their disposal space of their own from which they can launch their ‘attack’/resistance.³⁵ In the case of Tibetan refugees in South Asia, the commodification of Tibetan culture sustains the economic life of the community and helps Tibetans to maintain a distinct

identity. At the same time, it also expands the base for potential supporters and sympathisers of the Free Tibet movement.

The Interaction of Tibetanness with Western representations

Another very important the dynamic shaping Tibetan identity/Tibetanness has been their interaction with the Western audience. This is an area that has received substantial attention from scholars only since the last decade of 20th century. There have been two broad ways in which the whole issue of the poetics and politics of Western representations of Tibet and Tibetans have been dealt with. A representative of the first 'school' of thought is Donald Lopez.³⁶ He argues that Tibetans are 'prisoners of Shangri-La' with an image of themselves as a religious, peaceful, exotic and idyllic community. When the Tibetans went into exile, they found out that 'Tibet' was already there in the Western imagination and, given their limited options, they had to conform to the image in order to gain support. Tibetans, Tibetophiles and Tibetologists all have contributed to the romance of Tibet, which ultimately renders problematic the struggle for independence from Chinese occupation.

However, this whole Shangri-La business also can be seen in a different light where the agency of Tibetan people is recognised. Instead of focusing on representations of Tibet, attention may be given to the manner in which Tibetans have creatively appropriated their exoticised images and deployed them for explicit political purposes. Rather than painting Tibetans as mere victims, it should be recognised that they have been active in the creation and presentation of their own identity. As Christian Klieger argues, not only have they participated in portraying an image of themselves to outsiders, their self-perception has been a result of self-reflexivity. The mediation of Tibetanness between the refugees and their largely Western supporters is exemplified in the collision between the Occidental paradigm of Shangri-La and an indigenous utopia that constructs a distanced, sacred Tibetan homeland upon established Shambhala, Mt Peru, Mt Potala and divine rule mythology. Klieger calls this conscious and selective presentation of self 'Tibetan hyperreality'.³⁷

The Tibetan government-in-exile self-consciously makes representations of reflexive, politicised notions of culture and identity which are dependent upon the globalised production of institutions and the flow of cultural resources made possible through the onslaught of modernity. McLagan has shown how Tibetans have strategically deployed their culture in the West in order to mobilise political support.³⁸ The focus is on how the Tibetans engage Western discourses about Tibetanness in the process of constituting themselves in exile. Not only have the Tibetans embraced modern technology such as the Internet³⁹ to promote their cause, they also have projected their culture as compatible with universalising discourses such as environmentalism,⁴⁰ (world) peace, global indigenous sovereignty, and non-violence. Such representations are very much a part of 'New Age Orientalism' as well as contemporary transnational social and protest movements.

At the same time, one can trace the conception of Tibetan Buddhism as progressive, rational and politically correct to the Orientalist construction of Buddhism during the last 150 years. This 'classical Buddhism' was created in the 19th century as a reified entity by Europeans, and it was against this that all of the Buddhisms of the modern Orient were judged—and found lacking.⁴¹ The task of modernising Buddhisms took place in the 20th century. Western orientalist and South Asian Buddhists contributed to 'Buddhist Modernism' by claiming pure Buddhism to be rational, scientific and socially engaged.⁴² A close connection between Buddhism and emergent South Asian anti-colonialism and nationalism was also made in several parts of Asia. The Dharamsala elite, led by the Dalai Lama, was introduced to the Buddhist Modernist style in the forums of International Buddhism. The forums (including the World Fellowship of Buddhists and the World Buddhist Sangha) have been quite influential in shaping Tibetan identity claims in terms of universalist discourses of world peace, environmentalism and spiritualism.

Tibetan political identity also has been influenced by an interaction with the Western audience. The exiled elite recognise that religious and cultural identities are inferior compared to national identities as a source of political legitimacy in contemporary world.⁴³ Dharamsala has moulded its expositions on Tibetan identity accordingly. In their search for outside support, the Tibetan elite has been learning the language of international politics as dominated by the West. Democracy, human rights, peace, development and environmental protection are some such issues that the Tibetan activists have taken up. For instance, the non-governmental Tibetan Women Association (TWA) has been very active in the deliberations of United Nations World Women Conference.

The world-wide network of Tibet support groups, concentrated substantially in the West, has played a uniquely crucial part not only in promoting the Tibetan cause, but also in influencing discourse of Tibetanness in the diasporic community. The Tibetan cause, often designated as 'Free Tibet Movement' or the 'Tibet Movement', has attracted an exceptionally diverse group of people. As the membership profile of umbrella organisations (such as the International Campaign for Tibet) shows, different motivating factors lie behind the active support. Some see their activities as connected with Buddhist belief, and practice, while others are concerned with human rights, opposing communism and a range of other motivations.⁴⁴ High-profile support for the Tibetan cause from Hollywood stars and pop singers, along with few recent films such as *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun*, and *The Cup*, has increased awareness about Tibet in the West. How far this awareness translates into political support and activism is a different matter. Indeed, much if not most of the existing Western support for the Tibetan cause is based on particular representations of Tibetans as inherently spiritual and peaceful people. This restricts the alternatives available to those Tibetans who might be disillusioned with the Dalai Lama's insistence on non-violence and his giving up of the demand for independence.

The Western influence can also be seen in the evolving political structure of the Tibetan government-in-exile. The Dharamsala establishment has been mov-

ing towards democratisation as a means of gaining legitimacy in the West. These developments may be explained as image-building exercise, steps taken towards keeping up with times, responses to pressures from within the refugee community and, finally, as a result of the Dalai Lama's personal initiative. A democratic system with a National Assembly at the top has a very important symbolic role. A quota system operates according to which there are an equal number of representatives from the three principle regions of Tibet, as well as representatives from each of five major religious sects, a few representatives from outside South Asia and a few nominated members. 'The exiles use the regional and religious matrix primarily as a symbol for the homeland.'⁴⁵ The Tibetans in diaspora therefore vote to make a symbolic claim to Tibet rather than represent their own interests. There is also the argument that a democratic system is being imposed on the community by the Dalai Lama since political participation is seen by many ordinary Tibetans in terms of duty rather than a right. While this is true to certain extent, a high level of social activity in the non-institutional sector does provide huge 'social capital' for a Tibetan democracy.⁴⁶ The experience of a democratic political system, however rudimentary, also may reduce the overriding dependence of the Tibetan polity on the person of the Dalai Lama.⁴⁷

The Dalai Lama

This brings us to another crucial factor moulding the Tibetan identity: the person and symbol of the Dalai Lama. In recent years, Tenzin Gyatso, the XIVth Dalai Lama, has become one of the most widely recognised religious figures on the planet. Though the primary emphasis in his speeches and writings is on universalistic religious and spiritual matters, he has managed to link the Tibetan cause with universalist discourses. Not only is he the most prominent advocate of the Tibet cause, but also its main theoretician.⁴⁸ The centrality of his role in defining Tibetanness cannot be overemphasised. The institution of the Dalai Lama acts as a unifying symbol for matters of religion and politics. He is the king and the god, the active agent between this world and the next. He presents contradictory images: a 'simple Buddhist monk'/the supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism; human god; world-renouncing/world-encompassing.⁴⁹ Personal loyalty to the Dalai Lama plays a key role in the government-in-exile's efforts to strengthen the sense of a unified Tibetan identity: '... faith in Buddhism and in [the] Dalai Lama's office has provided cohesion necessary for maintaining a form of 'proto-nationalism' within a broadly dispersed world society'.⁵⁰ The centrality of the Dalai Lama's role also represents a striking instance of the power of symbols. Symbols are a reflection and representation of cherished social values; they sum up the most popular notions about self-hood and self-esteem embedded in the collective conscience of a social group, and function as 'historical' analogies with which illiterate masses can comprehend larger meanings of nationalism.⁵¹ The person of the Dalai Lama acts as this symbol for Tibetans in exile as well as for Tibetans in Tibet. Even though

Tenzin Gyatso has played an unprecedented role as a Dalai Lama, the question about a possible successor in case of his death cannot be dismissed. Since, more than the person himself it is the institution of Dalai Lama which acts as a cohesive force, it is reasonable to expect the institution to survive. What exact shape it will take, however, is a matter of speculation.

Host governments

Discourses of Tibetanness within the exiled community are not only limited by available vocabularies of expression, but also by the reality of refugee status. The host governments' attitude towards the activities of the refugees has been an important limiting factor. For instance, the official Indian line that the Dalai Lama and his followers are free to practice their religion and preserve their culture but are prohibited from engaging in subversive activities has remained unchanged since 1959. Even at the height of anti-Chinese rhetoric within the Indian foreign policy establishment, the Tibet issue was left largely untouched. The threat of a reprisal from Beijing has proved to be too strong for any change of policy. Indian governments since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru have helped in the rehabilitation of Tibetan refugees, but never extended support to the Tibetan cause. The Dalai Lama's choice of non-violence as the only way forward does not challenge the official Indian position that has always been somewhat ambiguous. But it is difficult to imagine that an Indian government would allow radicalised Tibetan refugees to use Indian territory as a base for violent activities.

Tensions within the Tibetan national identity

It is tempting to study the evolution of national identity in the Tibetan diaspora in terms of continuity and change. Policy pronouncements, institutional power structures, monastic institutions, material production (such as carpet weaving), performing arts; every single facet of socio-cultural life reflects the complementary as well as contradictory role played by forces of change and a cherished desire for continuity. An interesting facet that is being increasingly noticed is the difference between Tibetans from Tibet and those living in exile. This is witnessed not only in performing arts but also in monastic institutions. For instance, in the last two decades, there has been friction between the performances of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) located in Dharamsala and troupes of Tibetan artists from China's Tibet. 'For Tibetan nationalists, the critical task is to construct emblematic representations of unique culture and history that attaches to and emanates from Tibet, a task complicated by many refugees recognition that those projected by Tibetans from Tibet are often inconsistent with those of refugees'.⁵² Questions of authenticity have occupied a central position as often different versions and visions of Tibetan culture come out from within Tibet. Tensions resulting from the question of authenticity are also found in various monastic institutions in exile.⁵³ Here, significant differ-

ences are observed between those who are second generation refugees and those who have newly arrived from Tibet. All these simply go on to reveal the processual nature of culture.

The question of a single strand of Tibetanness is also complicated by these being substantial differences of opinion even within the exiled community. Often, there are voices within the community that disagree with the government-in-exile's stance on several issues. Most crucial of these issues is the basic question of the fate of Tibet. The Dalai Lama's famous Strasbourg Five Principles and repeated assurances to China that what his government wants is not independence but significant and real autonomy have had little impact on Chinese policies. This has increased the frustration and impatience of many people, especially the politicised younger generation. Articles in journals like the *Tibetan Review* and pronouncements of organisations like the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) and the academic activities of organisations such as the Amnye Machen Institute represent more radical strands within the exiled Tibetan community. In recent years, the TYC has adopted an aggressive stance and has engaged in more confrontational activism, even though this puts it at odds with the government-in-exile. It seems that the future of the Tibetan liberation movement is going to be one of conflict between traditional Buddhist morality as defined by Dalai Lama and the activities of increasingly militant people.⁵⁴

There is a big dilemma ahead. The Dalai Lama enjoys widespread reverence for his non-violent campaign and has an international forum for the cause of a Free Tibet. At the same time, this support is conditional upon non-violence which has failed to achieve anything till now. While morally the Gandhian strategy of non-violence is unquestionable, politically it is difficult to imagine it succeeding in the Tibetan case, at least in the near future. The popularity of Dalai Lama and his public support in the West has not materialised into concrete political action for Tibetan cause.⁵⁵ There is an increasing realisation that, given the economic and political clout of China, no state will take up the cause of Tibet in an effective way. So, rather than depending on Western support Tibetans themselves have to take the initiative. A good place to start with could be to examine why support for Tibet is minimal among the Third World peoples and the minorities in developed countries. While the support of the Hollywood liberal elite adds glamour to the Free Tibet Movement, some serious political networking needs to be done with various grassroots social and political movements to be effective in the long-run. The effectiveness of deploying transnational ideas for an essentially nationalist cause needs to be seriously considered.

Tibetan national identity is a product of constant negotiation and renegotiation among several interrelated discursive and material factors. The transnational element is as significant a part of the evolving discourse of Tibetan nationalism as is the indigenous element. Tibetanness among those living in exile is as much a discursive product of displacement (the conditions of diaspora) as of the sense of belonging (to a distinctive nation).

Notes and references

1. Various versions of this paper were presented at the Nationalism Conference at Bristol, British Association of South Asian Studies (BASAS) Conference at London, and British International Studies Association (BISA) Conference at Manchester, all in 1999. I have benefited from the suggestions of Judith Squires, Vernon Hewitt and Andrew Waytt at Bristol. My thanks to the anonymous referees for comments on the paper and especially to the editor for suggesting I submit my conference paper to *Contemporary South Asia*. I wish to acknowledge crucial encouragement from Nitasha without which I would have kept missing the deadlines.
2. For discussions on the continued exoticisation of Tibet in the West, see Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination* (London: Athlone, 1993); Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-la Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of a Sacred Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
3. Greater Tibet does not fall neatly into any one of the conventional world regional categories. Toynebee classified it along with other Buddhism dominated countries of Asia as an 'Indic society', in contrast to the 'Hindu' India and the 'Far Eastern' China. On the other hand, most of the other post-war books and textbooks in cultural geography over-emphasise the connections between China and Tibet. For an interesting discussion on the politics of geographical imagination on these lines see Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (London: University of California Press, 1997).
4. The Government of Tibet in Exile, 'Introduction to the Tibetan Refugee Community'; website: <<http://www.tibet.com/Govt/into-tibet.html>> .
5. This stands in contrast to the demographic situation in Tibet. For instance, according to Chinese statistics for 1959, the demographic distribution for Tibet was 20% for U-Tsang, 53% for Kham, and 27% for Amdo. See Thomas Methfessel, 'Socioeconomic adaptation of Tibet refugees in South Asia over 35 years in exile', in Frank J. Korom (ed), *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora: Papers presented at a panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995* (Wien: Osterreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1997), p 13.
6. Lisa Malkki, 'Citizens of humanity: internationalism and the imagined community of nations', *Diaspora*, Vol 3, No 1, 1992, p 37.
7. Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"?', in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996).
8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); categorisation of nations as 'Imagined community' does not fully convey the sense of continuous imagination that goes into the making and existence of a nation. So, I prefer to use the form 'imagining'.
9. Steven Venturino, 'Reading negotiations in the Tibetan diaspora', in Frank J. Korom (ed), *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1997), p 103.
10. None of the prominent experts on nationalism except Eric Hobsbawm speak about Tibet. Hobsbawm mentions Tibet only in passing and that too as a possible exception to his theory: 'It is difficult to judge how far purely divine authority may have nation-making possibilities. The question must be left to the experts in the history of Mongols and Tibetans'. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p 72.
11. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
12. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
13. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p 1.
14. For Smith's critique of Instrumentalist views see Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Verso, 1991). For his specific criticism of Gellner, see Anthony D. Smith, 'Memory and modernity: reflections on Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol 2, No 3, 1996, pp 371-388.
15. In case of Tibet, this archive may be seen in terms of what Hobsbawm calls 'protonationalism'. Georges Dreyfuss has applied this idea of 'proto-nationalism' to the Tibetan case. See Georges Dreyfuss, 'Proto-nationalism in Tibet', in Per Kvaerne (ed), *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies Fagernes 1992 Volume I and II* (Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), pp 205-218.
16. Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein (eds), *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet* (London: University of California Press, 1998).

17. Smith, *op cit*, Ref 14, p 21.
18. This is not to deny that there are significant dissensions within the Tibetan community. The most common factors in these divisions tend to be sectarian politics and conflicts over a common understanding of reincarnation.
19. Frank J. Korom, 'Introduction: place, space and identity: the cultural, economic and aesthetic politics of Tibetan diaspora', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, p 4.
20. I borrow three meanings of the term diaspora from Steven Vertovec, 'Three meanings of "diaspora", exemplified among South Asian Religions', *Diaspora*, Vol 6, No 3, 1997, pp 277–300.
21. A good place to begin with for those interested in various facets of contemporary Tibetan culture in diaspora is Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5 and 9.
22. Meg McLagan argues that the Tibet movement represents an emergent form of transnational, intercultural political activism; one that depends upon the complex production and circulation of representations of 'Tibetanness' in various arenas that cross cultural and national boundaries. See Meg McLagan, 'Mystical visions in Manhattan: deploying culture in the year of Tibet', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, p 68.
23. Christiaan P. Klieger, *Tibetan Nationalism (The Role of Patronage in the Accomplishment of a National Identity)* (Meerut: Archana, 1994), pp 84–120.
24. Korom, *op cit*, Ref 19, p 4.
25. Stuart Hall, as cited in Ian Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p 9.
26. Bisharat in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (eds), *Culture, Place, Power: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (London: Duke University Press, 1997), p 19.
27. Ashild Kolas, 'Tibetan nationalism: the politics of religion', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 33, No 1, 1996, pp 58–59.
28. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, as Strom discusses, refers to generative dispositions which produce regulated improvisations of conventional practices in accordance with the situation. See Axel K. Strom, 'Between Tibet and the West: on traditionality, modernity and the development of monastic institutions in the Tibetan diaspora', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, p 22.
29. As the noted anthropologist James Clifford points out, 'the spaces of collection, recollection, and display marked by the term museum are multiplex and transculturated'. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p 216.
30. Emphasis in original. Robert E. Wood, 'Touristic ethnicity: a brief itinerary', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol 21, No 2, 1998, p 222.
31. Korom, *op cit*, Ref 19, pp 1–12.
32. Maria S. Calkowski, 'The Tibetan diaspora and the politics of performance', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, pp 51–58.
33. Mona Schrempf, 'From "devil dance" to "World healing: some representations, perspectives and innovations of contemporary Tibetan ritual dances', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, pp 91–102.
34. Here, one may recall bell hooks who deals with the specific context of African-Americans and the dominant white culture in the United States. Commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption and the radical alterity of the other is denied by 'a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through the process of decontextualization.' See bell hooks, 'Eating the Other: desire and resistance', in R. Scapp and Brian Seitz (eds) *Eating Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p 181–200.
35. Discussed in Lily Kong and S. A. Brenda, 'The construction of national identity through the production of ritual and spectacle: an analysis of National Day parades in Singapore', *Political Geography*, Vol 16, No 3, 1997, p 217.
36. Lopez, *op cit*, Ref 1. The book is not about Tibet, but the West and a fascination with Tibet within the western popular imagination.
37. Christian P. Klieger, 'Shangri-La and hyperreality: a collision in Tibetan refugee expression', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, pp 59–68.
38. McLagan, *op cit*, Ref 22, pp 91–102.
39. Meg McLagan, 'Computing for Tibet: virtual politics in the post-Cold War era', in George E. Marcus (ed), *Connected: Engagements with Media* (London: University of Chicago, 1996), pp 159–194.
40. For a critical discussion on an environmentalist Tibetan identity, see Toni Huber, 'Green Tibetans: a brief social history', in Korom, *op cit*, Ref 5, pp 103–119.
41. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (ed), *Curators of Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p 16.
42. Heinz Bechert, as cited in Toni Huber, 'Shangri-La in exile: Tibetan identity representations and transnational culture', paper received from the author.
43. Kolas, *op cit*, Ref 28, p 61.

44. John Powers, 'The Free Tibet Movement: a selective narrative', *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol 7, 2000; website < <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/7/powers001.html> >.
45. Jan Magnusson, 'How Tibetans deal with political conflicts in exile: the National democratic Party of Tibet enters exile politics', Paper presented at the 5th Conference for the Nordic Tibetologists, Moesgard, 5–7 September 1997; Website: < <http://www.hum.au.dk/etno/dRARbejdspapir/5magnusson.htm> >.
46. Jan Magnusson, 'Making democracy work in exile: an exploratory analysis of the scope for democratization of the Tibetan refugee community', in H. Krasser *et al* (eds), *Tibetan Studies*, Vol 2 (Vienna: Osterreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1997).
47. Even if the institution of Dalai Lama continues after Tenzin Gyatso, it is hard to imagine Tibetan community maintaining semblance of united political goal without a democratic structure. Given the controversy of Panchen Lama, urgency for such a alternative structure of governance is increased by the fact that the reincarnation issue would be a troublesome one.
48. Powers, *op cit*, Ref 45, p 9.
49. Klieger, *op cit*, Ref 23, p 67.
50. Korom, *op cit*, Ref 19, p. 3.
51. Dawa Norbu, *Culture and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1992).
52. Calkowski, *op cit*, Ref 32, p.
53. Strom, *op cit*, Ref 29; and Axel K. Strom, 'Tibetan refugees in India: aspects of socio-cultural change', in Kvaerne, *op cit*, Ref 15, pp 837–847.
54. Jane Ardley, 'Violent compassion: Buddhism and resistance in Tibet', Paper presented at the Political Studies Association UK 50th Annual Conference, 10–13 April 2000, London.
55. Tsering Shakya, 'Tibet and the Occident: the myth of Shangri-la', *Lungta: Special Issue: Tibetan Authors*, April 1991, pp 21–28.