

## Social, Political and Educational Status of Tibetan Women in Exile

\*Saba Fatima

*Doctoral Research Scholar, Centre for West Asian Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi-110025 (India)*

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 10 January 2019

#### Keywords

Tibetan Community, Exile, Tibetan Women Refugee, Mcleod Ganj, Dharamshala, Tibetan Women's Association Talk, Dalai Lama

#### \*Corresponding Author

Email: [fsaba.urooj@gmail.com](mailto:fsaba.urooj@gmail.com)

---

### ABSTRACT

The study seeks to examine the social and political status of Tibetan women refugee living in McLeod Ganj suburb of the city of Dharamshala, India. It attempts to highlight the issues and challenges of Tibetan Women those are staying as refugee in India. It observes the Education appraise, political representation, marriage customs and traditions of the Tibetan women by surveying with them in actual social and political setting of the Tibetan community in Exile. This study was conducted by consciously observed records, and analyses via interviews in their cultural physical setting of Dharamshala. It is based on survey of Tibetan women in Exile between the age group 18 to 60 years. It is true like other women, Tibetan women face challenges of representation, living in denial, and had been living with cultural limitations of Tibetan community in Dharamshala. Despite the challenges and restrictions upon them, what is more important to Tibetan women in Exile is the protection of their male members, and has been worried due to the torture and inhumane conditions of their people in captured Tibetan region. Tibetan women living in Exile Himachal Pradesh also shared their horrible experiences of life in captured Tibetan region. Even though living within limitations Tibetan Women in Exile were full of courage, confidence and bravery. Furthermore, Tibetan people in Exile were expressed gratitude for the support of India for allowing them to stay in India. This article would bring to light the status of Tibetan refugee women in exile to the rest of the world. This analysis find out that even after living in the difficult situation as refugees these Tibetan women are an inspiration for all the women. Tibetan Women may emerge as a role model for all the women to lead a life with dignity and strength. Even though living within limitations and challenges Tibetan Women in Exile are full of courage, confidence and bravery.

---

### 1. Introduction

Tibetans came in India in 1959 with their spiritual leader Dalai Lama due to the Chinese attack on them. Since then Tibetans living in India as that time Indian government allowed them to stay in Mcleod Ganj (Upper Dharamshala). According to United Nations Agency of Refugees report 2001, India host about 1,10,000 Tibetans refugees.<sup>1</sup>Tibetans refugees's number in India keeps on fluctuating due to their arrival and return. Tibetans refugees living in India are legally denoted as foreigners. Although Indian government supported them to rehabilitate and allowed them to live in India till infinite. They are provided identity documents by the Indian Government which they have to renew yearly. Tibetan refugees in India are denoted as foreigners, so they provide special identity documents while travel internationally that permits them to travel and return to India with no objection. Tibetan community lives peacefully in India. Tibetans living in Mcleod Ganj, Dharamshala, expressed their love for its culture and preserves it through their monasteries. Similarly the Tibetans community in Exile has very rich culture which they always expand and preserve through organizing cultural programmes in their schools of arts. It is interesting to look upon the culture and socio-political conditions of Tibetan community in Mcleod Ganj, Dharamshala. They also made their 'Tibetan parliament in Exile' for the representation and management of community living in Exile. Tibetan community is interesting and unique in its culture, but what has been the position of women in the political, social and cultural setting of Tibetan community in exile. So far very few organizations investigated about the

social and political conditions of Tibetan women living in exile. Therefore, to understand the status of Tibetan Women in exile community it examines the position, issues and challenges of Tibetan women living in Upper Himachal Pradesh.

This is to provide a factual understanding of the status of Tibetan women in exile. This report prepared by surveying Tibetan women (age 18-60 years) living in Mcleod Ganj and Dharamshala Tibetan settlements in India. I visited Mcleod Ganj, Dharamshala to study the status and challenges that the Tibetan women in exile community deal with during their stay in India as refugees. To discover various aspects such as what kind of position do they have in Tibet community in exile and do they have say in political matters. I also interviewed four women three of which were middle aged between her 22 to 30 years while one was an old lady. Different people have different views on women's role those living in Tibetan exile community, so I interviewed people in village area as well as the women in Tibetan parliament in exile. Consequent outcomes was different from the view what I had earlier on the status of Tibetan women in exile. Tibetan community in exile found very mobile, where women hardly stay within their households in all seasons. So, the analysis requisite extra effort in collecting data, as many women were used to be out of their homes during the survey period. I interviewed and began the conversation first with the very simple questions such as about the life style of the people living in McLeod Ganj and the exile community. In addition to have an actual understanding of their family life at household, used very simple questionnaires and

limited to family. Furthermore observation was also conducted about the family backgrounds and cultural traditions of Tibetans in Exile: to understand how they live and cook their cuisine etc. Since, Tibetans in Exile have very rich cultural heritage, Tibetan Community also showed me their costumes and the musical instruments gladly during visits. Moreover, Tibetan community extended gratefulness to the Indian government for providing them support services, and home in India.

## 2. Historical Background of Tibetan Conflict and its Community in Exile

In 1950 Chinese community regime invaded Tibet to make it permanent part of China. Tibet was economically as well as strategically important to China due to its vast possession of natural resources and strategically important border with India. Tibetan government was enforced to accept the China Rule in exchange of promise to protect their political system and Tibetan Buddhism. However, China failed to kept their promises which led to Tibetan resistance in 1959. Tibetan uprising was brutally suppressed by the China and also had led to sense of fear Dalai Lama to be killed or kidnapped.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, Tibetans began to settle in Dharamshala in 1959 as His Holiness Dalai Lama and his followers had to escape from Tibet. At that time Prime Minister of India allowed Dalai Lama and his followers to settle in McLeod Ganj ie. (Upper Dharmshala). Earlier McLeod Ganj was recognized as colonial British summer picnic spot. Later in 1960 Tibetans established their government in exile for their community. Since longer time Dharamshala had found been connected with Hinduism and Buddhism. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Tibetans immigrants established many monasteries in Dharamshala establishment. Furthermore in 1970, The Dalai Lama and Tenzin Gyatso also opened a Library of Tibetan works for the community in exile. This library had over 80,000 manuscripts and other important resources related to Tibetan history, politics and culture. It is considered as one of the most important institutions for Tibettology in the world. Tibetan community in exile have cabinet ministries for education, finance, health, home affairs, information and international relations, religion, culture and security. They also do have their independent commissions. Tibetans had been to intensify crackdown and organized oppression on its people from long time. The exploitation of Tibetan community had noticeable evidence in the form of many self-immolations.<sup>iii</sup> This phenomenon of oppression and immolations continued to persist. Since 2009 about 127 Tibetans including 19 women had set themselves on fire in the name of freedom and asked for the return of their Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama to Tibet. In exile community also people self immolated themselves. Since 1998, six Tibetans had set themselves on fire in order to protest against the cruel crackdowns inside Tibet.<sup>iv</sup> These Tibetan people stood in solidarity and express their respect for the supreme sacrifices made by with these martyrs. Even at present any expression of identity and patriotism for their self representation dealt with severe manner in Tibet. In China, over the years arrests and sentencing of Tibetan singers, writers and social activists has increased, of all those who found supported, or work for the welfare of the Tibetans. Chinese authorities continued to torture even the family members and relatives of these self immolators and call them murderers.

## 3. Social Practices, Education Status and Political Representation of Tibetan Women in Exile

After the visits and interviews of the Tibetans and Tibetan women in McLeod Ganj, results stated that "Tibetans in exile are struggling to manage their livelihood. It is very tough for them to make both the ends meet. According to the Tibetan interviewees, if these vendors evacuated, there won't be any place for them to earn a livelihood and manage their lives. They expressed appreciation to allow them to stay and build their lives while they were came to India due to the fear of persecution in Tibet and for the love they received during their stay as a refugee. Furthermore, Tibetan community in Exile has many NGOs operating in McLeod Ganj whose, very mission has been to preserve and nurture the Tibetan culture. These NGOs aim has been to empower their lives by distinguish programmes such as organized educational programmes, skill-building, workshops, distribution of social services, promotion of environmental and cultural activities etc for the assistance of the displaced Tibetan community. One of these NGOs that operational to raise awareness regarding situation inside Tibet, and work for the upliftment of Tibetan community in Exile is 'Tibetan Women Association'.

### 3.1 Tibetan Women's Association Talk (TWA)

Tibetan Women's Association is an NGO whose aim is to spread awareness about the situation of Tibet. It works to promote social, economic and political equality and address the human rights abuses of Tibetan Women both in Tibet & in exile. It was interesting to attend a Tibet Awareness talk that was held in Dharamshala, entitled 'the status of Tibetan women in exile' by the Tibetan Women Association. They presented and talk about the ongoing exile projects for women. TWA staff member focused mainly on the abuses of Tibetan women by the Chinese as opposed to the abuse of Tibetan women within the community. TWA expressed how they face difficulty in coverage and publication of story of Tibet people, as people in Tibet under China occupation are not even allowed to disclose the sufferings that they are facing under China occupation. TWA stated a heart-breaking interview of Tibetan women from Tibet. It articulated how Tibetan woman suffered abused and neglected within the Tibetan community in occupied Tibetan region and when TWA to highlight the abuse published this story and interview. TWA discloses how they had to be taken down the interview due to social pressure on the woman for sharing her story. It has become cultural and social norm such as this one, which dis-empower and suppresses the voices of many brave and abused Tibetan women. To facilitate these Tibetan women in exile TWA members rightly argues that their needs to be addressed. For example, I asked Tenzin what resources and facilities there were for Tibetan females in India who had been raped or sexually or physically abused. She stated that currently they have no women's helpline or centre for women to get advice and support from. However, such projects she said would hopefully begin soon. On the positive side, the TWA and a few Tibetan female politicians in exile have been instrumental in protesting against the cover-ups and injustice done to these Tibetan women in exile. The TWA also launched a year-long project on the Legal Empowerment of Tibetan women in exile, which aimed at encouraging Tibetan women to understand and

use their legal rights to deal with violence and abuse. However, without any in-depth, reliable data, it is hard to say how many abuses (or deaths) of Tibetan females in exile are left unreported or covered up.

### 3.2 Analysis

Since 1959 Tibetan women in exile are playing influential roles in itself and by taking stand. Tibetan women were found taking care of their families both financially and domestically. As due to the Tibetan conflict in Tibetan community male members were either imprisoned or dead. Nowadays Tibetan women are also taking part in administration work too. In terms of positives the visits and interviews indicated that the educational levels of younger Tibetan women were much better than the previous generations. Tibetan women in exile were found satisfied with access to health services. The recommendations might be certainly helpful in terms of highlighting the need to address the social, economic, health, education and domestic issues facing Tibetan women in India. But the women, I met in parliament had different views on women status. According to her, presently Tibetan Parliament in Exile have four seats reserved for the Tibetan women and presently they have more than four women in current parliament. According to her women's political participation has been increased and they have say in political matters. They enjoy equal rights and have access to education and political representation. Most of the young women were found absent as they were out for their higher studies in other parts of India, which indicated that large section of Tibetan Women in exile Community, have access to higher education as compared to opportunity of access to education in occupied Tibetan region. Even if they have access to education in occupied Tibetan region, they have various kinds of restrictions up on them. On contrary, in leadership area Tibetan women needs serious consideration in Tibetan community in exile, as there was a general opinion that women participate less in leadership roles both in public and at family level. It was asked during the key Informant interview but somehow I failed to receive this information. This may be because I didn't ask very direct questions. Yet I have plans to do further studies specifically focusing on these areas and use better tools to garner these responses.

During survey any interesting traditions came into light one of which was that Tibetan women dressing culture was different among married to the unmarried ones. Both married and unmarried Tibetan women used to wear the same type of dress but with slight difference, as women who are married are suppose to wear apron over their skirts as a symbol of marriage tradition. In terms of marriage status, early marriage, i.e. below 19 years old found widespread in the Tibetan community. Out of all the married respondents, only 7% of these had been married while they were between the ages of

30-40 years old. Potentially chauvinistic attitudes were reported too, with the increase in 'inter-caste' and 'inter-religious' marriages found to be a 'concern' in the community. However, it was surprisingly claimed by the Tibetan community that domestic violence has not been very high. It only took place where spouses found alcoholic. In addition, the only case specifically reference to a domestic violence quoted by a field staff member who even blaming woman for the cause, according to her its women fault up to some level because she was stays with her violent, alcoholic husband: Surprisingly, the report produced very little data or evidence of sexual and physical abuses of Tibetan women in exile. Subsequently, Although on the whole Tibetan community have amazing traditions and culture such as one of which is they have organized separate monasteries for women and man, but found no distinction in their monasteries. Women monasteries are also organized in similar manner and have all the things as that they do have in men. However, still Tibetan women social and political status in exile is currently exist with severe restrictions of their religious and political system.

### 4. Conclusion

Tibetan Community has very rich culture that both men and women love and try to preserve in their monasteries. While, men and women have separate monasteries but both organised in similar manner, women monasteries have everything that the men's monasteries. Tibetan Women in exile community are strong and taking part equally in all aspects of life in the absence of their male members due to the conflict. While, It was surprising to be in Dharamshala listening to a long talk about the status of Tibetan women that did not mention abuse of Tibetan women right there in Dharamshala even once. Cases of Domestic violence are found negligible in Tibetan community and only took place while husband consume alcohol. Besides, women faces various religious and political restrictions in Tibetan community and have trends of inter religious and inter-caste marriages. In Tibetan Community in exile political representation of women is getting better and getting recognition, as presently they have four seats fixed for women in Tibetan Parliament. Furthermore, Tibetan Women in exile educational status is getting better and large numbers of women are staying away from family for higher studies. In addition education is playing great role in Tibetan community in exile for the upliftment and recognition of the women. Thus, Tibetan women in exile community has better position as compared to women in occupied Tibetan region, but currently more important to Tibetan Women is the security concern and protection of their people in occupied region from inhumane and degrading treatment rather than the women empowerment in their community. Despite the social and political restrictions Tibetan Women in exile are taking part in all aspects of life equally with male members courageously and bravely.

### References

- <sup>i</sup> Resource Information Centre" *India: Information on Tibetan Refugees and settlements*", United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2003
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://freetibet.org/about/history> ,accessed on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018
- <sup>iii</sup> Tibetan Women Association, <http://tibetanwomen.org/s> ,accessed on Mar15<sup>th</sup>, 2018
- <sup>iv</sup> [www.tibetanwomen.org](http://www.tibetanwomen.org) ,accessed on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018