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Tibetan Refugees: Resisting Diasporization?

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Introduction

If the Tibetan exile community qualifies as a diaspora – a hypothesis which I shall substantiate in the course of my analysis –, Tibetan refugees evidently have not dispersed much, or far, as their favourite destinations for refuge have been Tibet's neighbouring countries, i.e. India, Nepal and Bhutan. This, however, cannot constitute a sufficient reason for denying them the status of a diaspora, but they also seem to have been resisting the idea of dispersing any further ever since. Why have they been resisting the diasporization¹ which should have become, or should become, part of their new identity?

This paper intends to explore the paradox currently bearing upon the Tibetan diaspora, which can be summarized thus: Tibetan refugees, especially in India and Nepal, are showing clear signs of resisting the diasporization which nonetheless lies at the core of all diasporas' past, present and/or future experience.

Such a behaviour may be explained not so much by the practical challenges involved in any further dispersal as by a strong willingness on their part to avoid dispersing any further whenever possible. The diaspora experience has indeed become extremely meaningful for them, as, I contend, exile has coincided for the Tibetans with the creation of the Tibetan nation, as well as with the developing of a Tibetan national identity. This hypothesis, which has been supported by a number of Tibetologists, including Melvyn Goldstein, Tsering Shakya, Martin Mills, Geoffrey Samuel and Anand Dibyesh (Anand: 205), is in keeping with Lord Acton's well-known contention that exile is the nursery of nationality (Acton: 181). The relationship between nationalism and exile became exacerbated in the Tibetan case, as the situation of Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal, was such that Tibetan refugees were able to live among themselves in refugee settlements specifically designed for the preservation of Tibetan traditions, and so, ultimately, for the development of a Tibetan national identity.

Because of the particular layout of refugee settlements in India and Nepal, they have been able to maintain and develop a national identity in and of exile, but, as a consequence, they have also come to believe that their national identity would be severely shattered, should any further dispersion not involving the same layout occur. I will illustrate this belief with two examples, i.e. 1) the Tibetan refugees' mitigated reactions towards the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project, and 2) the Tibetan refugees' adherence to their refugee identity, and so to a precarious stateless statute.

¹ I use the term diasporization, though it is a near-neologism, because, in my opinion, it describes adequately the process, for any given diaspora, of further dispersing. Note that dispersal is understood here mostly as a physical but also as a psychological, i.e. identity-related, process.

It thus appears that Tibetan refugees, especially in India and Nepal, are moving counter-current to other diaspora communities in other parts of the world. Tibetan refugees are resisting the current trend of globalization – they are in their vast majority refusing the possibilities offered to them to improve their lifestyles, either by moving to the United States or by opting for the nationality of their country of residence, when this is possible, in order to preserve a distinctive Tibetan national identity. Yet, at the same time, Tibetan refugees seem to be using at least some of the globalization resources, such as the improved means of communication, to create what Thubten Samphel has called a “Virtual Tibet” (Samphel, 2003), that is, a kind of virtual Tibetan diaspora, intended to replace the real Tibet, which has been lost.

The initial paradox which I have outlined – that the diaspora experience has become a threat to the Tibetan nation by inducing further dispersion – is then further complicated by this fundamental ambiguity: There is on the Tibetan refugees’ part a resistance to physically further the diaspora which is at the same time balanced, or even contradicted, by a willingness to engage in a process of virtual diasporization.

In order to unfold and account for the tensions between the Tibetan refugees’ simultaneous reliance on and rejection of the diaspora experience, I shall first briefly come back to various definitions of the concept of diaspora, as well as related typologies, the better to understand the nature of and the reasons for the Tibetan refugees’ resistance. In so doing, I will also discuss if, and to what extent, the Tibetan refugees’ attitude invalidates the status of a diaspora for the Tibetan exile community. I shall then illustrate what I have called the Tibetan resistance to diasporization with two examples, 1) the Tibetan refugees’ mitigated reactions towards the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project, and 2) the Tibetan refugees’ adherence to their refugee identity, and so to a precarious stateless statute. I will, for this, mainly rely on the analysis of the monthly newspaper most-widely read within the Tibetan diaspora, the *Tibetan Review*, as well as on a number of interviews that I have conducted within the Tibetan refugee community in India. I shall eventually reassess this resistance to diasporization in view of the new willingness, on the Tibetan refugees’ part, to create a “Virtual Tibet”.

I. The Tibetan Diaspora: A Problematic Definition

In the introductory statement of the journal *Diaspora*, Khachig Tölölyan allows at first for a broad interpretation of the concept of diaspora:

“We use ‘diaspora’ provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.” (Tölölyan: 4)

This definition, however provisional, is nonetheless relevant to discuss the Tibetan case, for at least two reasons.

First, Khachig Tölölyan draws from the etymology of the word to emphasise the idea of dispersion, or diasporization, which, I suggest, lies at the core of all diasporas’ past, present and/or future experience, even though this is precisely what Tibetan refugees are putting into question. Kim Butler, borrowing from Walker Connor, also underlines that a diaspora is

defined, at its simplest, as the dispersal of a people from its original homeland (Butler: 189). To be sure, this definition has been deemed too broad to be useful, and, following the widespread, and sometimes also inconsistent, uses of the word,² the necessity of a reassessment has become obvious to a number of diaspora scholars, including Robin Cohen, Khachig Tölölyan, William Safran, Gabriel Sheffer and Steven Vertovec, to quote only a few. Yet, in every attempt to redefine the concept of diaspora and in spite of the resulting diversity in the understanding of the word, dispersal always remains a defining feature to help determine which communities qualify as diasporas.

Second, Khachig Tölölyan's definition intimates that various groups of people are entitled to form a diaspora, though the nature of the people which do constitute a diaspora is bound to have an impact on the nature of the diaspora. I would like to suggest, in particular, that a diaspora of refugees largely differs from a diaspora of immigrants, because refugees generally resist the idea of becoming a diaspora. Indeed, according to refugee scholars, becoming a diaspora entails for the members of a refugee community relinquishing their status as refugees. As Liisa Malkki has shown, the reason why their refugee status matters is that refugee-ness can have a positive connotation: she concludes from her case study that "Refugee status was valued and protected as a sign of the ultimate temporariness of exile and of the refusal to become naturalized, to put down roots in a place to which one did not belong." (Malkki: 35) To follow her argument, and applying it to the Tibetan case, "Being a refugee, a person was no longer a citizen of [Tibet], and not yet an immigrant in [India]. One's purity as a refugee had become a way of becoming purer and more powerful as a [Tibetan]." (Malkki: 35) Relinquishing their refugees status, in order to become a diaspora, the Tibetans would lose all this, and this is precisely, I contend, why they are resisting the diasporization process.

It would then seem that the Tibetan exile community, because of its willingness to be regarded primarily as a refugee community, refuses to qualify as a diaspora. Yet, a closer look at the criteria generally used by diaspora scholars to discuss diasporas may help qualify this first impression.³ I will retain William Safran's much detailed list of criteria:

"I suggest [...] that the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (Safran, 1991: 83-84)

William Safran's criteria can be summarized thus: 1. dispersion or dispersal; 2. a collective memory about the homeland, also known as the homeland myth; 3. a troubled relationship

² Rogers Brubaker refers to this phenomenon as the "diaspora" diaspora – "a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space." (Brubaker: 1)

³ In lieu of a definition of what constitutes a diaspora, most diaspora scholars actually provide a list of defining criteria for the diaspora.

with the host society, or, alternatively, with host societies; 4. an idealization of the homeland, which eventually induces a return movement; 5. a commitment to the maintenance or restoration of the homeland; 6. a continuous relation to the homeland, which is important in the definition of the diaspora's identity.

In the following discussion of the Tibetan refugees' resistance to diasporization, I will mainly come to question two criteria, i.e. 1. dispersion or dispersal and 3. a troubled relationship with the host society. It is therefore important to look at other diaspora authors who have later offered a number of adaptations to William Safran's list of criteria. Regarding 1. dispersion or dispersal, Robin Cohen comes up with two additional ideas: For him, the origin of the dispersion is often traumatic and can result from an expansion from a homeland, for trade or colonial purposes (Cohen, 1997). Kim Butler, as for him, insists on the fact that the dispersion consists more of a scattering rather than of a transfer, as there should be a minimum of two destinations after dispersal (Butler, 2001). Regarding 3. a troubled relationship with the host society, Robin Cohen considers the possibility of a distinctive creative and enriching life in tolerant host countries (Cohen, 1997). Kim Butler would add another distinguishing criterion involving the temporal-historical dimension, that is, a diaspora should be at least two generations old (Butler, 2001). Irrespective of whether all these criteria are necessary, or whether only some are sufficient for a given ethnic group to be considered a diaspora, the Tibetans currently seem to be filling most of them, which qualifies the Tibetan exile community as a diaspora.⁴

In a later article, William Safran develops the idea of evolving degrees of diasporaness or diasporacity based on a continuum of attitudes and forms of behaviour towards the homeland (Safran, 1999). These degrees⁵ go from "a vague family tradition of origins, eclipsed by full social, cultural, and political integration into the host nation", to "an acute awareness of origins", to "an active interest in the general fate – and in important specific events – of the homeland", to "influencing a hostland government to pursue policies favorable to the homeland", to "going off to fight for the homeland", and to "preparing to return to the homeland" (Safran, 1999: 257). The question for William Safran is: "How many of these characteristics must be found among an ethnic or religious minority in order for this minority to qualify as a diaspora?" (Safran, 1999: 257) He does not give any theoretical answer to that

⁴ Not only have the Tibetans been engaged in a process of dispersal for over two generations now, but they have also developed a peaceful (if sometimes strained) relationship with their host countries, while developing an idealised homeland myth in the form of a national identity that commits them to restore an autonomous, if not independent, Tibet.

⁵ I am leaving some of these degrees out. The full text reads: "Among individuals who have been dispersed to various lands, whether voluntarily or not, one finds a continuum of attitudes and forms of behavior, ranging from a vague expressive identification with the homeland all the way to single-minded involvement with its affairs. This continuum is approximately as follows:

- vague family tradition of origins, eclipsed by full social, cultural and political integration into the host nation;
- an acute awareness of origins, going no further than a sympathetic curiosity about them;
- a personal identity significantly affected by that awareness;
- an active interest in the general fate – and in important specific events – of the homeland;
- regular communication with kin in the homeland, including the sending of remittances to the homeland on a regular basis;
- influencing a hostland governments to pursue policies favourable to the homeland;
- voting in homeland elections;
- going off to fight for the homeland;
- preparing to return to the homeland.

Without becoming crudely quantitative, one is nevertheless justified in asking how many of these characteristics must be found among an ethnic or religious minority in order for it to qualify as a diaspora." (Safran, 1999: 257)

question, yet, in that perspective too, there is little doubt that Tibetan refugees exhibit a (very) high degree of diasporaness or diasporacity.

The problem in the Tibetan case, I suggest, is that there is a tension between this very high degree of diasporaness or diasporacity, as highlighted by William Safran, and a refusal, or at least a resistance, from the Tibetan refugees' part, to the very idea of being a diaspora, or of evolving into a diaspora – and this tension, if mostly present in the idea of physical dispersal, can also be associated with psychological, i.e. identity-related dispersal, as I will show. Is it enough for outsiders to consider the Tibetan refugee community as a diaspora? And when will the members of the Tibetan diaspora also consider themselves as a diaspora?

If I have used a somewhat positivist approach to determine where the Tibetan diaspora, that is, the Tibetan diaspora today, fits in the framework of diaspora theory, I do not consider the Tibetan diaspora as an eternal given, since, for the Tibetan diaspora, as well as for other diasporas, notable, and structural, changes have occurred, and still occur, over time. Such temporal dimension suggests a possible evolution – the resistance to diasporization, in particular, may weaken over time, thus proving the diasporaness or the diasporacity of the Tibetan diaspora. William Safran thus poses the two limits of this time dimension: “How long does it take a diaspora consciousness to develop?” and “What is required for an immigrant group to remain a diaspora?” (Safran, 1999: 204) Yet, before viewing the Tibetan diaspora in a diachronic perspective, I wish to adopt a synchronic approach, so as to consider the Tibetan refugees' resistance to diasporization.

II. The Tibetan Resistance to Diasporization

In order to explore the Tibetan resistance to diasporization, I propose to look at two specific instances of this paradoxical process. The first example is concerned with the refusal of physical dispersal, as it involves a project of resettlement to the United States, whereas the second example is more concerned with a psychological form of dispersal, involving the possibility for Tibetan refugees to opt for Indian citizenship.⁶

The following analysis will rely on two complementary sources to determine the preoccupations of Tibetan refugees in India: These are 1) articles from the *Tibetan Review*, the monthly newspaper which is most-widely read within the Tibetan diaspora, and 2) a number of interviews that I have conducted within the Tibetan refugee community in India over the last five years.

A. The Tibetan United States Resettlement Project⁷

The Tibetan United States Resettlement Project, or TUSR, is a coalition of Tibetans refugees and American supporters to the Tibetan cause, which was established in 1989 to support a project involving the resettlement of 1,000 Tibetans in the United States. The project was however conditioned to the approval from the Government-in-Exile, as well as from the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama's advice was to talk the project over, which led to several rounds of intensive discussions about whether or not 1,000 Tibetan refugees should be brought to the

⁶ However, this second example can also be regarded as involving a kind of physical dispersal, since allowing for a further integration, and even assimilation, of the Tibetan community within Indian society.

⁷ The factual data about the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project are drawn mainly from two articles, one from Michael Carrington (Carrington, 1997) and the other from Rinchen Dharlo (Dharlo, 1994).

United States for resettlement, after which the coalition decided that it was worth going through with the project.⁸ Tenzin Thetong, from the International Campaign for Tibet, Rinchen Dharlo, the Dalai Lama's representative, and Edward Bednar, the president of the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project, then met up with pro-Tibet organizations, resettlement agencies, congressional staff and immigration law advisors to devise a strategy to promote the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project. Congressman Barney Frank and Senator Ted Kennedy became the primary sponsors of the Tibetan immigration proposal in their respective House and Senate Immigration Sub-Committees.

Public Law 101-649 of 29 November 1990 reads:

SEC. 134. TRANSITION FOR DISPLACED TIBETANS

A) IN GENERAL. – Notwithstanding the numerical limitations in sections 201 and 202 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, there shall be made available to qualified displaced Tibetans described in subsection (b) 1,000 immigrant visas in the 3-fiscal-year period beginning with fiscal year 1991.

B) QUALIFIED DISPLACED TIBETANS DESCRIBED. – An alien described in this subsection is an alien who –

1) is a native of Tibet, and

2) since before the date of the enactment of this Act, has been continuously residing in India and Nepal.

For purposes of paragraph (1), an alien shall be considered to be a native of Tibet if the alien was born in Tibet or is the son, daughter, grandson, or granddaughter of an individual born in Tibet.

C) DISTRIBUTION OF VISA NUMBERS. – The Secretary of State shall provide for making immigrant visas provided under subsection (b) (or described in subsection (d) as the spouse or child of such an alien) in an equitable manner, giving preference to those aliens who are not firmly resettled in India or Nepal or who are most likely to be resettled in the United States.

D) DERIVATIVE STATUS FOR SPOUSES AND CHILDREN. – A spouse or child (as defined in section 101 (b) (1) (A), (B), (C), (D), or (E) of the Immigration and Nationality Act) shall, if not otherwise entitled to an immigrant status and the immediate issuance of a visa under this section, be entitled to the same status, and to the same order of consideration, provided under this section, if accompanying, or following to join, his spouse or parents.⁹

The first group arrived in the United States under the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project in April 1992 and settled in six cluster sites throughout the United States, i.e. New York City, San Francisco, Portland, Madison, Amherst and Twin Cities. It did not take long before all 1,000 Tibetans reached the United States. The Office of Tibet organized a meeting of Tibetan communities in North America in January 1993 whose purpose was to strengthen the organizational structures of the Tibetan communities in North America. It was decided, after the completion of the resettlement of the 1,000 Tibetans, to establish a Tibetan association in each of the cluster sites, as well as what was called the Tibetan Community Assistance Project – an advisory office, providing technical assistance to the Tibetan

⁸ Four advantages were drawn from these discussions, which far outweighed the disadvantages of the project – 1) the possibility for Tibetan refugees in the United States to maintain the Tibetan cultural identity alive while fully participating in the American way of life, as has been the case for other diaspora communities in the United States, 2) the prospects of a higher standard of living, 3) the possibility to make more money in the United States, money which could be sent back to the Tibetan refugees in India and in Nepal, and 4) the expected willingness of Tibetan refugees in the United States to be more politically active to support the Tibetan cause.

⁹ The full text of Sec. 134. Transition for Displaced Tibetans can be found in a publication of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (*International Resolutions and Recognitions on Tibet (1959-2004)*: 164).

communities throughout the United States and Canada with the aim of building strong, viable communities. There are now an estimated 10,000 Tibetans living in the United States.

I wish to focus on the debates that run through the Tibetan community in India at the time when the project was being discussed and implemented.

Assessing the exile situation, Nawang Dorjee underlines the importance of settlement life for the Tibetan identity and, more generally, for the Tibetan community: “If the settlement life no longer attracts us, slowly we will be hard pressed to keep our people together in a community setting which is so vital for our cause. This holding environment to maintain our identity is so crucial in our fight for freedom.” (Dorjee, 1992: 11) For him, physical dispersal, threatens to lead to disaggregation, and even to disintegration, of the Tibetan community, thereby endangering the Tibetan cause itself. He thus establishes a distinction within the Tibetan diaspora between life in the refugee settlements and life outside the refugee settlements, and especially abroad, meaning outside India and Nepal, which leads him to discuss the risks involved in the new resettlement project:

“Why? At a time when we are in danger of vanishing from this earth, at a time when there is this desperate need to remain together in a holding environment to preserve our culture and identity, what is the need to scatter our people to different parts of the world? [...] History is a witness that a society flounders and loses its identity when it tries to reach too far beyond the horizon of its own cultural and biological line of development. And this is exactly what is happening to our people. We are being scattered like beans across the world, with the rhetoric of not only preserving our culture but being ‘ambassador of Tibet.’ Will we have the chance to be authentic expressions of what lies deepest in ourselves as Tibetans or will we be totally assimilated as Americans, Germans, Indians, Nepalese – with Tibetan faces?” (Dorjee, 1992: 13)

Following Nawang Dorjee’s line of reasoning, life in the refugee settlements is equated with isolation, and thus with success of the Tibetan cause, whereas life outside the refugee settlements is tantamount to assimilation, and thus to the necessary failure of the fight for Tibet. However, his argument relies on a paradox, if not an inconsistency. He tries to point out the unique situation of the Tibetan diaspora: Its homeland, Tibet, is facing a threat of extinction, and so the diaspora is the only place where a sense of Tibetan identity can be preserved, hence an additional sense of responsibility for the Tibetan diaspora. Yet, at the same time, he refers to other diaspora cases as further proofs of the dangers of dispersion, thus implicitly equalling the Tibetan diaspora with other diaspora communities.

His idea is that, for any given diaspora, but this is especially true for the Tibetan diaspora, there is a need to stay close to the heart of the diaspora, in this case, Dharamsala. India is the place where the Tibetan refugee community has been able to recreate the nucleus of a Tibetan nation, which includes physical symbols, i.e. a government and a social matrix with all the infrastructures to look after the welfare of the people, as well as a collective psychology. In his own words, “The distancing of our people from the leader and the seat of the government, no matter what others say, will have an effect on the psyche of our people. [...] A social matrix, an environment not only to feel the vibrations and the urgency but be a part of the dynamics of the society has inexpressible values and connections both mentally and physically.” (Dorjee, 1992: 13) According to him then, the resettlement project, which is orchestrated by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, sends a psychologically disturbing message to the Tibetan people, because it signals a change in the fundamental objective of the Tibetan exile community. In light of his argument, the project is bound to strike a fatal blow to the

social matrix of the Tibetan community, thus seriously weakening Tibetan identity, all of which works against the fight for the Tibetan cause. How can the Tibetans still be expected to fight for a free Tibet and be encouraged to become model citizens of the world?¹⁰ It is the mere possibility of such a question which is problematic, for, as Nawang Dorjee concludes, “We are a capable and hardy lot with the ability to smile even in times of misery. But how long can the smiles last if we are being scattered to the winds to become model citizens of the world?” (Dorjee, 1992: 14)

However, such view is not representative of the way all Tibetans feel about the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project. Rinchen Dharlo, who recalls the discussions surrounding the project, remembers one conclusion in favour of the project’s implementation: “If the additional efforts of these 1,000 Tibetans can contribute towards saving the cultural and national identity of six million Tibetans inside Tibet and bring our long cherished goal of independence close to realization, it would be worth the risk of these 1,000 Tibetans losing some of their identity in this country.” (Dharlo: 14-15) It was believed that Tibetans in the United States could be more politically active to support the Tibetan cause than Tibetans who stayed on in India and Nepal, an idea based on the active political mobilisation shown by the very Tibetans who, in the United States or in Canada, had pushed for the Tibetan United States Resettlement Project in the first place.

Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal were thus facing a dilemma: They had to choose between fighting for Tibet from the United States by means of an easier political mobilisation due to the improvement of their living conditions at the expense of their Tibetan identity, and fighting for Tibet by preserving their Tibetan identity within Tibetan refugee settlements in India or in Nepal.

This dilemma leads to a number of questions: How long will isolation, i.e. life in homogeneous communities, in India and Nepal, still be sustainable? Is it not time to consider further integration within the wider Indian society, or even within other even more foreign societies? Should Tibetan refugees really try to avoid interactions with Indians? And are the advantages that they draw from such a behaviour really superior to the disadvantages that come with it?

B. The Refugee Status¹¹ of Tibetan Refugees

It is first to be noted that the refugee status question can be linked to the Tibetan community’s recent education problems – in any event, the refugee status question is mostly discussed within the education debate context, which is why I will need to briefly look at the content of the education debate before turning to the refugee status question proper.

¹⁰ “Whatever the arguments for such a project, no one can deny the fact that the transfer of our people to distant lands will slowly but surely damage the social matrix and holding environment that we have so painstakingly built over the years of exile. Instead of replenishing and expanding the infrastructures that we have built in the form of offices, schools, religious centres, settlements and other organizations we are in a way unwittingly taking the life out of them. It is a kind of desertion where the able leave to find niches elsewhere, leaving the rest to hold the fort, without much ammunition or fighting spirit.” (Dorjee, 1992: 13)

¹¹ This refugee status that I am referring to with regards to Tibetan refugees is more a social than a legal status, for almost all the Tibetans living in India consider themselves as refugees, whether they come from Tibet or whether they were born in India. In any case, they are refugees under Indian law, but they are not refugees in international law, i.e. the United Nations High Commission for Refugees does not consider them as refugees.

When education was set as a top priority by the Dalai Lama, the idea was to provide each Tibetan child with the essential of Tibetan traditions and customs, as well as with a modern, i.e. Western-type, education. It has been said that the Tibetan education system was very successful, but also that the problems faced by young recently graduated Tibetans come from its very successes. As Jetsun Pema, the Dalai Lama's younger sister and director of Dharamsala's Tibetan Children's Village, analyzes: "Success breeds its own problems. [...] With growing number of school and college graduates from various training backgrounds returning to the community, there is now a problem of finding suitable jobs for them." (Pema: 288)

Unable to find enough qualified jobs within the Tibetan community anymore, young Tibetans have been tempted, since the beginning of the 1990s, to take up Indian citizenship, in order to gain better educational and professional opportunities within Indian society, even if such a step means giving up their refugee status.

Thondup Tsering tackles the question of Indian nationality in an article entitled "Should Tibetan Students in India Become Indian Citizens?" (Thondup T., 1990). He first acknowledges that a refugee in India is treated as a second-class citizen, meaning that most of the job and higher education opportunities available to the general Indian public are closed to Tibetan refugees. He notes, however, that the question of whether or not Tibetans in India should take up Indian citizenship is a very sensitive and emotional issue. And this, according to him, comes from the importance that Tibetan refugees attach to the refugee status – the idea of taking up Indian citizenship and relinquishing this status is thus very much looked down upon by most Tibetans, and a Tibetan can even be regarded by other Tibetans as a traitor to the Tibetan cause for doing so.

In keeping with this idea, most of the Tibetan interviewees¹² responded in a way that tends to confirm the symbolic importance that they attach to their refugee status.

The questions, which are part of a section dedicated to nationality, read:

- 1) What is your nationality?
- 6) Would you like to change nationality?
- 7) For what other nationality would you like to change? And why?
- 8) Do you consider yourself a refugee?

Almost all interviewees consider themselves both as Tibetans and as refugees, and quite a few of them questioned the relevance of questions "1) What is your nationality?" and "8) Do you consider yourself a refugee?" because they deemed the answer to be obvious. The importance, or the obviousness, of the refugee status for Tibetan refugees can be found in answers such as: "Of course, I am a refugee!" (Dolma Y., from New Delhi) Yet, some Tibetan refugees have pondered over this question of the refugee identity of Tibetan refugees. For instance, Karma C., from Dharamsala, answered: "Yes, and also no, my parents were refugees, but I have not really felt being a refugee in the true sense. We have better opportunities than local Indians, I sometimes feel strange calling myself a refugee."¹³ The diversity of answers invites to draw a distinction between the refugee status of Tibetan refugees as an identity status, which explains

¹² The questionnaire that I am referring to here was conducted from 2004 to 2008 in various Tibetan settlements throughout India.

¹³ There are a few other cases of interviewees who do not regard themselves as refugees, such as Dhondup J., from Bylakuppe ("I consider myself a Tibetan but not a refugee.") and Dawa B., from New Delhi ("I am not a refugee.").

why most interviewees unquestionably consider themselves refugees, and the refugee status of Tibetan refugees as a legal, social and/or economic status, which leads a few of them to question the validity of the refugee status as applied to themselves and to Tibetan refugees at large.

The questions regarding a possible change of nationality also provide a number of meaningful answers with regards to the importance of being a Tibetan refugee. Lhamo C., from Bylakuppe, explains that: “I would not like to change nationality because I am proud to be a Tibetan.” Tsewang S., from Dharamsala, comes up with a similar explanation: “I am proud to be a Tibetan.” Sherab P., from Choglamsar, insists that: “I was born a Tibetan, I will die a Tibetan.” Thubten D., from Darjeeling, further explains that: “No, I do not want to make a fool of myself, we are refugees, and changing nationality will not set our country free!” Such answers show that there is, among Tibetan refugees, an undeniable pride in being a Tibetan, but also in being a Tibetan refugee. In a way, it is a question of honour for Tibetan refugees to stick to being Tibetans, to stick to being Tibetan refugees. Besides, as Sherab P., from Choglamsar, points out: “We are the happiest refugees in the world because of the Dalai Lama.” Taken at face value, this wholehearted support to the Dalai Lama suggests that many Tibetan refugees do not see the point of relinquishing a refugee status that can only bring them happiness. One may wonder, however, whether respect for one’s spiritual and temporal leader is reason enough to hold on to being a refugee.

I also met two interviewees who admitted to be holding an Indian passport. The first one, Dawa B., from New Delhi, explained that: “I have many nationalities, but I am a Tibetan in my heart.”, whereas the second one, Lobsang P., also from New Delhi, insisted that I should not mention this fact in my interview. These two opposite reactions point to two different views generally held by Tibetan refugees with regards to the refugee status: 1) it does not matter which identity documents you possess, you will always be a Tibetan, and if being a refugee is part of being a Tibetan, then you will always be a refugee, not matter what, and 2) it does matter what identity documents you chooses to hold, it does mean something about you, and if you opt for an Indian passport, you are in effect no longer a Tibetan, and certainly not a Tibetan refugee, something you should be ashamed of.

Unsurprisingly, the other interviewees, who do not hold an Indian passport, but who would like to change nationality, if possible, are essentially motivated by economic factors, such as the perspective of finding better jobs more easily, which is perfectly in keeping with the aspirations that sparked the education debate or gave birth to the resettlement project to the United States.

Yet, no matter how much of a sensitive issue the refugee status question is, Thondup Tsering is of the opinion that a Tibetan will not loose his/her identity by merely taking Indian citizenship, something, he insists, quite a few Tibetans should do – it is a matter of common-sense. His idea is that the Tibetan community is made up of small-time farmers and sweater sellers, which is all very well, except that it seems insufficient to help further the Tibetan cause in any meaningful way: “Can such a community ever succeed in liberating and reconstructing Tibet without depending on others? And what is the purpose of fighting for independence if we are to depend on others in running our own country?” (Tsering, T.: 13) The Tibetan community in India should aim at self-sufficiency, a goal which, according to him, is only attainable if some Tibetan refugees are ready to give up their too much cherished refugee status: “We need to improve the expertise of our work force and the only means for a Tibetan to train and obtain employment in the military, government services, industrial,

business, medical and other skilled and semi-skilled occupations is by taking Indian citizenship.” (Tsering, T.: 13)

In that respect, Thondup Tsering’s conclusion as regards the abandonment of the refugee status by Tibetans in India parallels Rinchen Dharlo’s conclusion with regards to the resettlement project of Tibetans to the United States. Both of them advocate the idea of a useful sacrifice of a few individuals for the sake of the community. It is true that the Tibetan refugees who will take up Indian citizenship run the risk of being assimilated within the Indian mainstream, just as the Tibetan refugees who will go to the United States may face severe acculturation problems there, but, in both cases, their sacrifice may well benefit the Tibetan community at large, so that there should not be any hesitation whatsoever on the part of those Tibetan refugees. (Tsering, T.: 13) Christiane Labiesse calls this the paradox of the Tibetan education system: “What a paradox: The educational system set up in order to safeguard Tibetan culture ultimately leads its students to assimilation!” (Labiesse: 12)

The interviews which I have been conducting over the past five years confirm Bhuchung K. Tsering’s analysis of the Tibetan refugees’ situation in the early 2000s. Pointing to the refugee status question as an enduring issue for the Tibetan community in India, he remarks that: “The organised settlements in the Indian subcontinent, which have been the back bone of the Tibetan refugee community, is today facing strain on account of centrifugal forces of modernisation and development.” (Tsering, B., 2002b: 24), by which he meant principally the incapacity of the Tibetan community to absorb young Tibetan graduates (Tsering, B., 2002b).¹⁴ He advocates dual citizenship as a possible solution. Could a new system encouraging Tibetan refugees to adopt the citizenship of the host country, be it India, Nepal, or any other country in the world, be a solution to the sensitivity regarding the refugee status issue for Tibetan refugees? Emphasizing that such a principle is actually included in the Charter of the Tibetans-in-Exile,¹⁵ he notes a discrepancy in the way in which it is applied to Tibetan refugees according to their host country, which he refers to as the double standards of Dharamsala. The problem, according to him, is that the Government-in Exile, while allowing Tibetans in the West to become citizens of the host country, denies such an opportunity to Tibetans in India. It is true that, if they were to become citizens of India, Nepal or Bhutan, Tibetans in the settlements would cease to be Tibetan refugees, which is the very reason why they have received settlement benefits in the first place – How could they justify still living in refugee settlements in India, Nepal and Bhutan, and receiving refugee benefits, if they are not refugees anymore, but Indian, Nepalese or Bhutanese citizens?

The problem is that the refugee status has become part and parcel of the new Tibetan exile identity, i.e. of Tibetan identity for Tibetan refugees. In effect, giving up one’s refugee status to take up the host country’s nationality is tantamount to leaving, or worse, to forcibly excluding oneself from, the Tibetan community, but keeping one’s refugee status most likely means giving up on all hopes of a better future – a better qualified job and higher education prospects.

It is true that, to remain true to itself, and to display a high degree of diasporaness or diasporacity, as defined by William Safran, a diaspora has to resist to process of assimilation

¹⁴ Nawang Dorjee also deplored a few years earlier the brain drain induced by the Tibetan community’s way of dealing with young Tibetan graduates (Dorjee, 1993).

¹⁵ Article 8 of the Charter of the Tibetans-in-Exile reads: “Citizen of Tibet - Article 8. [...] (2) any Tibetan refugee who has had to adopt citizenship of another country under compelling circumstances may retain Tibetan citizenship provided he or she fulfills the provisions prescribed in Article 13 of this Charter;”

to the host country, but there is a limit to that resistance, which involves the difference between becoming a diaspora and remaining a refugee community. What diaspora, other than the Tibetan diaspora, is made up only, or almost only, of refugees? If they do not get assimilated in the host country's community, at least diaspora members usually show some signs of integration, which they feel are necessary for life outside the homeland. So the question is: Are Tibetan refugees ready to live as a diaspora? I would like to suggest here that they may not be ready yet to accept an evolution which would have them relinquish their refugee status, and, with it, much of their Tibetan identity.

Indeed, in the two examples analyzed here, the Tibetan exile community resists abandoning its refugee status, by refusing geographical and psychological dispersal. Hostility towards the resettlement project in the United States intimates a desire to maintain the cohesion of the Tibetan community and, in many ways, so does the reluctance to take up Indian nationality, as it indicates a rejection of more advanced contacts with the host country that threaten to bring about a dilution of the Tibetan refugee identity.

In other words, the members of the Tibetan diaspora exhibit a strong degree of resistance to a process of diasporization that is nonetheless part of the very nature of a diaspora community for fear of losing the identity that had the Tibetan refugees evolve into a diaspora in the first place. Yet, the very idea of a resistance to diasporization on the Tibetan refugees' part is somehow counterbalanced by a willingness to work for the creation of what Thubten Samphel has called a Virtual Tibet.

III. Towards a Virtual Tibetan Diaspora?

The "Virtual Tibet", such as Thubten Samphel understands it, is made up, first and foremost, by the media. He points out that the Tibetan Review, the most widely read monthly newspaper of the Tibetan community, has been working very effectively for the Tibetan movement. For him, the impact was even planetary: "It became a forum for Tibetans from all four corners of the world and their friends to throw up new ideas and inspirations to strengthen the worldwide Tibet movement. [...] It contributed to creating a global Tibetan émigré community." (Samphel: 178)

In other words, the "Virtual Tibet" that the Tibetan Review contributed to create seems to have offered Tibetan refugees a way to make up for dispersal, understood here as both physical and psychological dispersal, so that that the Tibetan diaspora could eventually come to terms with the resistance to diasporization. What is more, the "Virtual Tibet" could in the end replace the (almost) real Tibet Tibetan nation which has come to exist in exile, and, more precisely, in the Tibetan refugee settlements of India and Nepal.

Indeed, for a virtual Tibet, or, more exactly, for a virtual Tibetan diaspora, to exist, it does not matter how widely scattered the Tibetan community is, as long as Tibetan refugees from all over the world maintain the idea of a Tibetan community, that is, of a Tibetan diaspora, by participating, either actively or passively, in the Tibetan community. In other words, the belief in the existence of a Tibetan community, however immaterial, suffices to make it come into existence. Where the media come in, whether in the form of newspapers, the radio, or, more recently, television and the Internet, is that all the Tibetans have, through the media, an opportunity to feel the existence of the virtual Tibetan diaspora. This opportunity however varies from one Tibetan to another, depending on their access to the media. If almost all

Tibetan refugees living in the refugee settlements of India and Nepal have access to the Tibetan press, not all of the Tibetan refugees have access to the Internet, especially in India and Nepal, but more so in the West.

Bhuchung K. Tsering notes that: “Somehow Tibetans have lagged behind [...] in jumping on the Internet bandwagon.” (Tsering, B., 2000: 27) He is however quite hopeful as to the development of Tibetan websites, particularly in the West – he gives the example of the Canada-based Tibetan portal www.tibetlink.com (Tsering, B., 2000: 27) –, but also, more recently, in India – pointing to the New-Delhi-based website www.phayul.com (Tsering, B., 2003: 26). Yet, he acknowledges the limited impact of an e-Tibet, when he laments: “The small world of Internet-literate Tibetans in exile [...] who compose but a small percentage of the Tibetans in exile.” (Tsering, B., 2003: 26) The trend, however, is towards a more comprehensive use of all the media instruments available to Tibetan refugees, first in the West, where such instruments were more readily available, then also in India. And this trend is illustrated by the fast growing number of Tibetan newspapers and magazines, such as *Tibetoday*, a now popular monthly magazine whose first issue came out in 2007, as well as by the increasing use of the Internet, by which I mean both the creation of new Tibetan websites and the use of Internet interfaces such as Facebook by Tibetan organizations.

The Tibetan exile community may have exhibited a strong degree of resistance to actual dispersal, be it in the form of a resettlement to the United States or in the form of a greater assimilation within Indian society, but a new trend seems to be arising, with the creation of a virtual Tibet and the apparent willingness of most Tibetan refugees to participate actively in the creation and development of a global exile community. The possibility is here for Tibetan refugees to take. Which leaves me with one final question: Do Tibetan refugees want to relinquish the Tibetan nation as it developed in exile, “the Tibet of our imagination”, as Tenzin Tsundue calls it (Tsundue: 21), for a globalised virtual Tibetan community that is yet to be fully imagined? The recurrence over the years of an issue such as the refugee status question shows that Tibetan refugees, especially in India, may not be ready to take such a radical step. In addition, the inchoate state of the newly-born virtual Tibet, along with the numerous technical difficulties Tibetan refugees are still faced with, suggests that there is, indeed, still a world of a difference between the imagined Tibet of exile and the virtual Tibet of the media. This may explain why Tibetan refugees are simultaneously encouraging and resisting the diasporization of the Tibetan diaspora, and this is not a problem for them.

Conclusion

The hesitations of Tibetan refugees regarding the process of diasporization of the Tibetan community in exile are thus very much in keeping with the resistance displayed by other refugees, or by refugees in general, as soon as the time comes for them to consider their refugee community not as a refugee community anymore, but as a diaspora. The possibilities offered to them to engage in both a “Virtual Tibet” and in the imagined Tibet of exile are great. Is it not possible to first try and live in both those worlds at the same time, before deciding which of the two worlds, if any, is worthier living in than the other?

I would like to suggest that the debate over whether or not it is better to live in the first, or in the second of these two worlds can be resolved by the common goal which the two worlds eventually offer to Tibetan refugees – the return to the homeland, the possibility, in the end, to be living in the real Tibet. The willingness to return to Tibet, whether one belongs to the Tibet

of exile or to the virtual Tibetan diaspora of the media, is epitomized by Tenzin Tsundue's story, which he recalls thus: "It is one of those rare stories of a Tibetan born and brought up in India, who had never seen Tibet, went to Tibet crossing the imaginary border in reality on foot, illegally and came back with burnt fingers." (Tsundue: 21)

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