CONSTRUCTING A VIRTUAL TIBET: THE EMERGING CULTURAL REVOLUTION AMONG THE TIBETANS IN EXILE

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ABSTRACT:

Social justice generally refers to the idea of creating a society or institution that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognises the dignity of every human being. This ideal, which was enshrined in the French Revolution, remains an endeavour even in today's post industrial society. Though the twentieth century saw the birth of many independent countries and the end of colonialism, modernisation and development has not lessened the social and economic disparity between the various categories of people. The principle of equality and human dignity, the guiding principles which inspired many a freedom movement, were forsaken ironically, in the quest for the formation of the modern nation state. The modern nation state with its homogenising principle led to the creation of minorities - those that refused to be homogenised. In its extreme, this intolerance of difference led to a situation, where people were forced to flee their motherland and become refugees. Once in the land of refuge, too the rights of the displaced people are often ignored or encroached upon by the coercive state machinery, powerful class, or by an ethnic community which is on the rampage.

While the refugees are victims of statecraft and the discursive power of nationalism and human rights, they are at the same time, active agents of social transformation and socio economic progress. This paper focuses on one of the most active and successful refugee community in India- the Tibetan refugees in India.

The occupation of Tibet in 1959 was followed by the Cultural Revolution, which was a systematic destruction of Tibetan religion, language and culture and forceful imposition of Han

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culture on unwilling Tibetans in an attempt to Sinocise them. In March 1959, the XIV Dalai Lama, fled to India with thousands of Tibetan refugees. When a symbiotic national community with specific political and geo-cultural boundaries gets dismantled, it leads to the collective construction of a sense of community among the members of the former national community. The Tibetan refugees soon got on with the task of the creation and sustenance of unified Tibetan community. One powerful tool in this exercise is the internet. Through a rapidly growing profusion of cyberspace activities, Tibetan exiles in India and the world over have created a virtual Tibet that is free to propagate various dimensions of Tibetan culture and religion that is banned in China, thus ushering in a new Cultural Revolution.

The main focus of this presentation is on how the formation of a new virtual Tibet and its growth in the wake of ICT development, has shown a ray of hope for the otherwise seemingly futureless Tibetan diasporic community in India. How the ICT revolution has been contributing to combating the hegemonic influence of the mighty Cultural Revolution of China by showing the path towards international social justice is the axial problem of this presentation.

Keywords: ICT development, cultural revelution, refugees

"I think most probably that this [internet] technology will be helpful, to get information easily. In that way it will make clear what truth is, what is reality and what is false propaganda. I think that provided each individual uses their own intelligence or mind to investigate further, this technology should be very useful."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama (From a BBC forum held 23 February 2000)

This paper is an appraisal of the efforts undertaken by Tibetan refugees to counter the perceived cultural genocide undertaken by the Chinese administration in Tibet, which worsened after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 was followed by the Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao Zedung in 1966. While it's specific objective was to purge the administration of capitalist, bourgeois as well as traditional elements, in Tibet it led to systematic destruction of Tibetan religion, language and culture and forceful imposition of Han culture on unwilling Tibetans in an attempt to Sinocise them. Even after the demise of the

Cultural Revolution in 1976, Tibetans claim that their language, religion and culture have been under threat of extinction in Tibet. This is one of the major factors pushing Tibetans out of their homeland as refugees. Scattered in different parts of the world, Tibetan refugees work at not just preserving but also reimagining their culture. One powerful tool in this exercise is the internet. Through a rapidly growing profusion of cyberspace activities, Tibetan exiles in India and the world over have created a virtual Tibet. This virtual world is free to propagate various dimensions of Tibetan culture and religion that is banned in China, thus ushering in a new Cultural Revolution. The axial problem of this paper is to demonstrate how the ICT revolution has been contributing to combating the hegemonic influence of the consequence of the mighty Cultural Revolution of China by showing the path towards international social justice.

Nation State, Social Justice and refugees

Social justice generally refers to the idea of creating a society or institution that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognises the dignity of every human being. This ideal, which was enshrined in the French Revolution, remains an endeavour even in today's post-industrial society. Though the twentieth century saw the birth of many independent countries and the end of colonialism, modernisation and development has not lessened the social and economic disparity between the various categories of people. The principle of equality and human dignity, the guiding principles which inspired many a freedom movement, were forsaken ironically, in the quest for the formation of the modern nation state.

In order to create a nation out of the disparate groups of people within the fold of the nation state, the ruling elite created a homogenous national identity by imposing the language, religion and culture of the dominant group on all the people. This led to the creation of minorities - those that refused to be homogenised. In its extreme, this intolerance of difference led to a situation, where people were forced to flee their motherland and become refugees. In fact, there is an established link between state formation and the flow of refugees. The human rights violations that occur in in the process of homogenising the disparate populations aggravate the tendency to flee as refugees. A sense of persecution and alienage are a result of a breakdown of the guarantee for a

minimum of social justice and human rights that the state ordinarily makes to its citizens. Hence today's human rights abuses are tomorrow's refugee movements.

Once in the land of refuge, the rights of the displaced people are again ignored or at times encroached upon by the coercive state machinery, powerful class, or by an ethnic community which is on the rampage. The refugees are often denied shelter and sustenance and at times perceived to be a threat to the integrity and harmony of the host society. In some situations, the host countries also try to use refugees and migrants for political leverage and often for interfering in the internal affairs of neighbours. Often without a residence permit or job license, refugees are at times, exploited by political parties and the Government.

This persecution and alienage that defines the refugee, both in his home and host country gives the impression that a refugee is a helpless victim, condemned to dictates beyond her/his control. This restraint is believed to rob the refugee of agency. While the refugees are victims of statecraft and the discursive power of nationalism and human rights, they are at the same time, active agents of social transformation. Unlike popular assumptions, refugees chart out their future, even though the conditions under which they do so, are not of their making. This paper focuses on one of the most pro active and successful refugee community in India- the Tibetan refugees in India.

The birth of Tibetan refugees

In 1949, Mao Tse- tung took over as the communist leader of China. In 1950, the People's Republic Army of China (PRC), marched into and occupied Tibet. Their reason for doing so was to liberate the Tibetans from the domination of the landlords and the reunion of Tibet with mainland China. For nine years there were fruitless attempts at negotiations between the Governments of China and Tibet. In March 1959, fearing kidnapping and assassination, the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled to India. Following the Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans fled to India as refuges. In the aftermath of this exodus, the Chinese establishment clamped down heavily in Tibet. Their immediate concern was to quell any further attempts at rebellion. Their main target was the monasteries. This was not so much due to the high proportion of monks who took part in the fighting (although a considerable number of them did,

and, more important, the monasteries were in many places the repositories of large stocks of ammunition and food supplies which kept the rebels going) as an excuse for breaking once and for all the priestly hierarchy's domination over Tibetan administration (Patterson 1961: 82). What followed was a total desecration of the monasteries, emptying it of all it's treasures. The monks and nuns were subjugated to various forms of punishment and torture.

This ire of the PRC towards the religious sphere in Tibet was not simply incidental. Twentieth century Tibetan identity was largely religious identity. The sanctification of Tibet began in 1913, when the thirteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet put forth guidelines to strengthen his declaration that Tibet was independent from China. Thee guidelines had strong religious overtones. A connection was forged between the landscape of Tibet, its culture, art and history, the Tibetan people, and their religious and political leader—the Dalai Llama. In imagining the Tibetan nation, the national symbols were embedded in religion. Hence a suppression and attack on the religion was seen as an attack on the core of *Tibetaness*. Hence the religious persecution forced a large number of Tibetans flee their motherland as refugees. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 saw a further increase in the number of refugees fleeing Tibet.

The Cultural Revolution

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, also known as Cultural Revolution was a socio political movement that occurred in China from 1966 to 1976. Authored by Mao Zedung, its stated goal was to enforce communism in the country by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from Chinese society, and to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party. In a revolution in which students turned against their teachers, employees tuned against their employers, thousands of Chinese were tortured, imprisoned, left landless and jobless and even killed.

When transported to Tibet, the Cultural Revolution worsened the already disturbed political, religious and socio economic environment in Tibet. The Cultural Revolution in Tibet advanced through complex debates and struggles. Mao envisioned a revolution of ideas that would uproot the hateful superstitions of the past and *on that basis* bring about the flowering of a new liberating Tibetan culture (Revolutionary Worker Online: 1994). But the leaders of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet were not interested in the revolutionary potential of Tibet's people. They wanted to develop "efficient" systems for exploiting Tibet's wealth--so the region could quickly

contribute to the "modern" China they envisioned. The Revolution aimed at destroying the four olds in Tibet, as in the rest of China- old ideas, old customs, old culture and old habit. The revolution fought to bring the "four news" into being--*New ideas, new customs, new culture and new habits.*

 Important questions were raised and struggled over again and again: What practices are reactionary feudal cultures and what practices is Tibetan national culture? Was it revolutionary or Han chauvinist to promote new cultural forms that the revolution had developed in eastern Han regions of China? The Red guards of the Cultural Revolution which included some Tibetans, undertook a systematic destruction of Tibetan religion, language and culture and forceful imposition of Han culture on unwilling Tibetans in an attempt to Sinocise them(Goldstein 2010). All education was taught in Chinese. Religion was declared to be poison and was effectively banned. Monasteries burnt down and sacred and ancient literary texts and ornaments were destroyed. The Cultural Revolution wanted to destroy the all evidences of Tibet's unique past. Fearing the systematic attempts at erasing Tibetan national and religious identities, a large number of Tibetans fled Tibet. Thus the ten years of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, saw a tremendous increase in the number of Tibetan refugees fleeing what they perceived to be cultural genocide in Tibet.

'Non Assimilative' policy of seeking refuge

Of the millions that have fled their homeland seeking refuge and a new life in host societies, the Tibetans stand out. They have taken refuge not as individuals alone, but rather as a national polity that has escaped the destruction taking place in Tibet and have sought and been given the protective mantle of a neighbouring friendly country. Both a people and cultural institutions have taken refuge in a host setting and have demonstrated both strength and survivability (Michael 1985: 737). In March 1959 the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibet's political and spiritual Head, left the Tibetan capital Lhasa, after the Chinese suppression of an uprising and travelled for three weeks on horseback to the Tibetan–Indian border, where he was welcomed into India and granted refuge. In a meeting held between the Indian prime minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru and the Dalai Lama, few areas of concentration were identified: rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees, education of the Tibetan children, preservation of the Tibetan culture and identity, gathering and disseminating information regarding Tibetans both inside and outside Tibet, pursuing the Tibetan questions at the United Nations, and

preserving and promoting unity among the Tibetan refugee community. Unlike most other countries that were unwilling to intervene and help, the Indian administration gave the refugees agricultural land in South India, notably Karnataka, and various regions in North India, with an almost uninhabited hill station, Dharamshala for it's headquarters. Over the course of the following years, tens of thousands of Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama – aristocrats and peasants, rich and poor, monks and lay people, and whole families from villages and towns around Tibet.

When a symbiotic national community with specific political and geo-cultural boundaries gets dismantled, it leads to the collective construction of a sense of community among the members of the former national community. The Dalai Lama with the support of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) soon got on with the task of the creation and sustenance of unified Tibetan community in the face of disparity with regard to the Tibetan populace. One important component that helps greatly in the creation and sustenance of a unified Tibetan identity is the internet.

ICT as a tool for revolution and social change

The internet can be a space for the promotion of social justice and a tool for a social and cultural revolution. It establishes a variety of links between ordinary people and their groups. People need not physically attend any event, rally, festival or course. The internet does not take the place of physical events but it does provide an electronic supplement to these activities that speeds up the process of radicalization (Innoye: 2011). The internet provides information as it happens, and we can react immediately in quick moving situations. This gives activists an advantage that they did not have in the past, for in the past era, the elites, the state and intelligence services had access to the most current information on unfolding events and a superior general picture than an insurgent movement had (*ibid*).

Of course, communication via the internet could also be indicative of a social problem. It can be accused of being a non real type of interaction that pulls people away from real interaction and leads to a loss of identity and community (Surrat 2001: 17). While accepting that people are the real agents of social change, the internet becomes an indispensible tool for uniting and initiating social change, especially in situations in which real communication is under threat. Such threats can be felt even in the most democratic of counties and situations. The curb on freedom of expression is even more in authoritarian countries. Even though internet offers more freedom of

expression, and is a tool for social change, many administrations, especially authoritarian ones, have found a way to hold their writ, in this age of limitless information. China, for instance, is said to be a networked authoritarian state. In such a state, while one party remains in control, a wide range of conversations about the country's problems nonetheless rage on websites and social networking services (Mackinnon 2010: 2). The so called 'Great Firewall of China', limits internet freedom within China and Tibet. Hence the onus of pursuing any sort of revolution with regard to the situation in Tibet rests largely with the refugees and those in the diaspora.

ICT as a source of unifying the heterogeneous Tibetan populace

Like a new revelation, the power of the internet to create virtual communities fascinated Tibetans in exile (Samphel 2004: 167). The creation and promotion of *Tibetanness* and support for the Tibetan movement across international borders, becomes even more significant, given that Tibetan diaspora is spread across the globe. Immediately after establishing his Government in Exile in India, The Dalai Lama appealed to Western countries for help. A number of Governments as well as individuals from the Western countries responded to the appeal by concrete assistance. This involved either giving aid to fund projects for the welfare and wellbeing of Tibetans, grants to research and develop various components of Tibetan culture, or at times even sponsoring the migration of Tibetans into Western countries.

This process of secondary migration among the Tibetan refugees is now becoming more and more popular. Switzerland was among the first few countries to respond to the Dalai Lama's appeal for help. Due to the initiative of numerous Swiss citizens, a total of 1,806 Tibetans received immigrant status in Switzerland between 1960 and 1996 (Gyaltag 2004: 245). From 1961 to 1981, the Swiss Government allowed 1000 Tibetan refugees to settle in Swtizerland. Since then, Tibetans have been moving to various places in Europe. In 1990, the US Government following the Swiss model formed the Tibetan US Resettlement Project that allowed 1000 Tibetans to immigrate to the USA. With the policy of family reunification, the numbers of those living in US, Canada and various places in Europe increased drastically. As India does not have provisions for official refugee status, getting refugee status and the subsequent benefits, also attracts a number of Tibetans to migrate.

While the Dalai Lama, as well as the Tibetan administration, feared the effect this secondary migration would have on the preservation of Tibetan culture, on account of its political and

economic advantages, such migrations were allowed. Though there is some amount of integration into Western societies, especially among the younger generation, Tibetans have still retained their identity and culture. Also every Tibetan community abroad, has its own organisation. These organisations are also available connected online. This thus establishes a transnational link between Tibetans living in Indi, and those living in various parts of Europe and North America. This in turn leads to a heightened sense of diaspora consciousness. This online link established among the various Tibetan communities across the world has not only led to a kind of a renaissance of Tibetan language, religion and culture, it has also had political consequences. As of now, there are two prominent views regarding the political future of Tibet. The community is divided on whether to demand full independence or, following the Dalai Lama, seek autonomy. These Tibetan refugees' use of the internet has a significant impact on the content and quality of the political debate among intellectuals and others, in China and even outside.

Virtual Tibet and the new Cultural Revolution

The Tibetan diaspora then, is the only space where efforts at preservation of Tibetan culture, is encouraged and promoted. TibetSites.com is the largest online directory of websites and blogs on Tibet with over 4000 listings in over 200 categories and, continues to grow. It was developed to assist Tibetans and non-Tibetans interested on Tibet, to easily find websites and information on Tibet. While most of the websites and blogs promote various aspects of Tibetan culture and language, a large number of sites deal with political issues pertaining to Tibet. There are many websites like TibetWrites that encourage the literary potential of Tibetans in exile. With Tibetan Buddhism drawing in an increasing population from the West, the number of sites devoted to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dharma are also increasing. The monasteries and religious school also have their own websites. The Tibetan Government in exile also has its own official website. Apart form keeping one updated on events and happenings connected to Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora, this website also has facilities for the green book and blue book. Having a green book allows Tibetans to make voluntary contributions to the CTA, and having a blue book allows a non Tibetan to become a friend to the Tibetan cause and make financial donations to Tibetan causes.

Various aspects of culture are preserved and promoted via the internet. In an open letter post on Tibetsites, Tibetologists from different parts of the world, appealed to the new Premier of China

to retain Tibetan as the medium of instruction in schools in Tibet. They complained that for several years now the use of Tibetan has been severely curtailed in schools in Tibet through various mechanisms. This has adversely affected the promotion of Tibetan culture. Tibetan language, which is supressed in Tibet, can be easily learnt online through the various websites. The Chinese consider religion as the opium of the masses, but Tibetan Buddhism is flourishing online. Buddhanet Weblinks documents the various sites devoted to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism around the globe. Many Westerners take online courses in Tibetan Buddhism, in fact a number of Westerners also now are efficient in conducting courses on Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan spiritual art online.

There are also a number of websites and online groups that are committed to the promotion of social justice in Tibet and act as a watch dog against human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese administration. International Campaign for Tibet, the world's largest Tibet related NGO uses online communication as an important tool in realising their goals of promoting democratic freedoms for Tibetans ,ensuring their human rights, and protecting Tibetan culture and the environment. Thus this plethora of websites contributes richly to enhancing the creation and sustenance as well as spread of Tibetan identity.

The online promotion of various aspects of Tibetan art, culture, religion language, has ushered in a new cultural revolution. Earlier, Tibet was an isolated country. Tibetan culture was thus hidden from the rest of the world. Now thanks to the internet, Tibetan culture is not only gaining exposure and flourishing, but also increasing in popularity the world over. This then becomes a new kind of revolution aimed at countering the harsh cultural consequences of the Cultural Revolution of China.

Social Justice within the community

The internet is revolutionary in bringing about another revolution aimed at social justice. The origin of Tibetan media, even print media, started not in Tibet, but in India. Traditional Tibet was never enthusiastic towards media and information. Information was always deferential, and because of this deference, information and knowledge were enshrined on the altar and became remote, inaccessible and the object of unquestioning faith (Samphel 2004: 169). Traditional Tibetan society was very orthodox, rigid and highly stratified. The aristocrats and the clergy often tormented the lower classes. Because of illiteracy and a rigid class structure, the serfs could

not complain. In fact, often, especially with regard to the clergy, they did not even think of complaining. They were not allowed access to knowledge.

The situation changed for Tibetans after their exile to India. Now in exile, Tibetans use information and knowledge for the improvement of their community and not as an object of worship. Tibetans also had access to various forms of knowledge and could freely compete for any positions. One refugee, who is working with the Central Tibetan Administration, in India informed that in Tibet, he would never have been possible of him, a lowly serf to work alongside Aristocratic Tibetans. But in exile, he could work as well as pursue his higher studies online. This qualified him to get the official position he now enjoys. Online courses, do not make the rigid class based barriers that traditional Tibetan society did. So, with the ICT development, the earlier rigid class based distinctions pertaining to use of information has been wiped out. Thus the idea of social justice and equality, which was lacking in traditional feudal Tibetan society, is now getting its voice heard with spread of ICT development across the Tibetan community in India and abroad.

Conclusion

Tibetan refugees are members of a population whose culture and language are in danger of being subsumed by dominant culture and language (Tillberg 2004). While the Internet and multimedia technology may present both direct conflicts with traditional values for such a population, it is also an opportunity to protect and promote use of an endangered language and culture. A social movement can "reprogram" public understanding of issues by using the Internet for "autonomous construction of meaning" (Mackinnon 2010: 5). The growth of the Tibetan exile media, especially ICT development, has had a significant impact on the development of a democratic community. Various NGOs have joined the ICT development, and are adding their own distinct voice and concerns to the deliberations within the exile community and in the shaping of public opinion and delivery of social justice. This social justice that the ICT development brings about are at two levels: One is to counter the Cultural Revolution imposed by a powerful country like China. Another is to bring about social justice within the Tibetan exile community itself.

Thus ICT development has propelled a move towards a new cultural revolution within the Tibetans exile community in India. This Cultural Revolution will be the anti thesis of the Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao Zedung. While the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s ushered in coercion to weed out traditional, religious as well as capitalistic elements, the

emerging ICT- assisted Cultural Revolution initiated by the Tibetan refugees aims at a more democratic retention of the traditional and re-imagined culture and identity of Tibet.

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