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Issue Brief



No. 7

June 2024

Centring 'Tibetan' in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies in India

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Cite this publication as:

Chawla, Swati.2024. 'Centring 'Tibetan' in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies in India'. Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence. *Issue Brief*. No.7. June. 1-7.

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Swati Chawla

Although prompted by tensions with China, the recently renewed administrative and scholarly interest in the Himalayan regions of India bordering Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet is nevertheless an opportunity to correct broader historical amnesia about the long histories of interconnectedness in the area. It is vital here to acknowledge the contribution of the six-decade-long exile of the Dalai Lama— both the institution and the person—and of the Tibetan community in exile in preserving Himalayan traditions and histories and in shepherding the institutions that enabled their revival in postcolonial India. This article makes a case for centring Tibet and Tibetan exiles in Tibetan and Himalayan studies in India.

Keywords: Tibetology, Tibetan exile, Himalayan studies

It had been a huge discovery for me— the Himalayas are not part of Indian history.
— Aniket Alam, 2020ⁱ

My pet peeve is that you can’t have a China policy without a Tibet policy, and you can’t have a Tibet policy ... without a Himalayan policy — a ‘Himalayan policy’ that encompasses both ‘domestic Himalaya’ and ‘inter-state Himalaya.’
— Siddiq Wahid, 2020ⁱⁱ

Introduction

In June 2023, following a *chintan shivir* (brainstorming session) chaired by Home Minister Amit Shah, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) asked personnel of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) to collect histories of the border villages manned by them “extending up to the past 2,000 years” (Manral 2023). Some understood the move was connected to the government’s plans to improve infrastructure in the border region. The ‘Vibrant Villages Programme,’ for example, aims to develop and create employment opportunities and promote local products in the border areas, which, the Home Minister stressed, could “eventually stop migration” out of these villages. He added that “contact and communication with every border village and its residents is very important for the security of the borders” (Manral 2023).

The Vibrant Villages Programme, a scheme sponsored by the Union Government for the financial years 2022-23 to 2025-26, has earmarked 2,967 villages along India’s northern and eastern borders with Tibet/China, situated across 19 districts in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh (Union Territory). The Programme has also authorised the establishment of several units of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), enhancing their infrastructure and inducting over 9,000 troops (*The Indian Express* 2023).ⁱⁱⁱ

This recognition of the need to better document and understand the histories of India’s vast border regions, stem depopulation, and bridge the disconnect between the locals and the officers of the Indian state is a reminder of the cartographic anxiety that continues to plague the Indian republic three-quarters of a century after decolonisation.^{iv} The 2,000-year village histories

collected by CAPF personnel—which would subsequently be added to their training module (Manral 2023) would undoubtedly reveal the older provenance for this anxiety and its relation to processes of border-making and nation-building. Most importantly for this article, these histories also remind us of the region’s embeddedness within the Tibetan Buddhist cultural world— age-old relations of trade, intermarriage, seasonal migration, and monastic patronage among Tibet and parts of Himalayan India— and the impact of the six-decade-long Tibetan exile on Himalayan peoples.

Regrettably, though, amidst laudable suggestions such as the promotion of traditional knowledge practices, showcasing local culture and heritage, and promoting social entrepreneurship—all of which, it is hoped, would encourage locals to stay in their native villages and perform a more significant role in safeguarding the borders (Manral 2023; *The Indian Express* 2023)—there is scant acknowledgement of this wider context and shared history, or of the debt of gratitude India owes to organisations and initiatives established by Tibetans in exile, which have been long performing some of the very tasks outlined by the MHA (Chawla 2023).



Figure 1. “Tibet Border NOT China Border,” Graffiti at Tibetan settlement at Majnu ka Tila, Delhi (August 2021). Photo (panorama) by the author.

Two years before the *chintan shivir* mentioned above, on 28 January 2021, as Indian and Chinese troops faced off in Ladakh in the western Himalaya, *The Times of India* reported about the Indian Army’s proposal for its officers to study Tibetology in order to “counter the propaganda and spread of influence by China.” As scholars of Tibet and the Himalaya, many of us welcome the so-called “Tibetology proposal” to understand “Tibetan history, culture, and language on both sides of the Line of Actual Control” (Pandit 2021). The government is right to emphasise the importance of building expertise on Tibet to understand the history and contemporary challenges in India’s relationship with China.

India-China relations cannot be approached through a strictly bilateral prism that excludes Tibet and the Himalaya. Equally, however, Tibetology cannot be confined within the bounds of state

interests and territorial conflicts on either side of the Tibetan plateau. And it cannot disregard the Tibetan community in exile (Chawla and Balasubramaniam 2021).

Forgotten friends?

The Indian Army's instrumental and strategic employment of Tibetology is not very different from how Tibet and the Himalaya have been approached in most scholarship. The production and codification of knowledge about Tibet had served European imperial interests from the earliest missionary writings to the travelogues and the histories written by diplomats.^v Linguistic competency was part of colonial officers' training; they learned the Central Tibetan dialect and were often tutored by monks from Sikkim, Ladakh, and Darjeeling who had spent time in Tibet (McKay 1997). This interest and expertise in Tibet declined in the postcolonial period. Officers were not posted in the frontier regions long enough to produce a cadre that knew the region and the language or could conduct original research. According to historian Tsering Shakya, Indian diplomatic scholarship about Tibet after Independence mostly regurgitated colonial writing.^{vi}

When I began scouring the archival record for my doctoral work, I realised that the exiled nuns and monks I had met in Dharamsala, who (or whose parents) had migrated after 1959, were far from blazing a trail. In fact, they had followed in the footsteps of their kinsmen and traders, monks and laypeople, who had, for generations, been crisscrossing what later became firm national borders. Furthermore, while looking for "Tibet" in archival catalogues and indices, I kept running into correspondence routed through Sikkim and Bhutan. My knowledge of Tibetan exile and of South Asian history thus far had not alerted me to these longer histories and interconnections.

I realised, too, that my own ignorance was not unique. As Indrani Chatterjee pointed out in her aptly titled monograph *Forgotten Friends*, postcolonial historians of modern India have "mastered a particular kind of forgetfulness about their trans-regional, trans-sectarian, and trans-national precolonial histories" (Chatterjee 2013, 20). A series of personal interviews on the state of the field of Tibetan studies with scholars of Tibet and the Himalaya from South Asia in late 2020 revealed that, like me, many of them had first discovered these interconnections in the archives that had been omitted from our history books (see the first epigraph by historian Aniket Alam).^{vii} Their research and teaching, like mine, have since sought to transcend regional and disciplinary boundaries in contemporary South Asia. In Chatterjee's words, an "insistent mapping of a *relational* universe" is "the starting point of the journey *out* of a fragmented landscape," through which postcolonial historians are attempting to revive "a modicum of the friendships that have been valued in and among Buddhist communities" (Chatterjee 2013, 20, added emphases).



Figure 2. “Jai Bharat, Jai Tibet” (“Long live India, Long live Tibet”). Graffiti at Tibetan settlement at Majnu ka Tila, Delhi (February 2022). The rest of the slogan, “Boycott Made in China”, is partially visible. The PRC flag forms the background. Photo by the author.

A reciprocal debt

Thus, 60 years into the Dalai Lama’s exile, his unifying role is widely recognised among the Buddhist communities in the region, as is the grassroots work of lay and monastic educational organisations under the Central Tibetan Administration (Wahid 2014; Chawla 2022a; Palsang 2009). The recent courses in Tibetology are a nod to this storied history of institution building.

Let us take the institutes identified by the Indian Army Training Command (ARTRAC) for their officers could enrol for training in Tibetology. Two of these— the School of Buddhist Philosophy in Leh, Ladakh (now known as the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies) and the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath^{viii}— were established in the early years after Independence, and focused on the study of Buddhism. Nehru had suggested to Foreign Secretary Subimal Dutt (1955-61) that CIHTS at Sarnath be run almost entirely by the Tibetan monks who had followed the Fourteenth Dalai Lama into exile.^{ix} The Tibetan exile community has since shepherded this institution. A third, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim, was inaugurated by India’s first Prime Minister in 1958; the Dalai Lama had laid its foundation the previous year on his way back from India for the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations. Also on the list is the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education in Bengaluru, which was established for Tibetans in exile as part of the Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) under the exile administration.

Indeed, monastic scholars from Tibet have long performed the yeoman’s service of shepherding the discipline of Tibetan and Himalayan studies in India. Its foundation in the modern period was arguably laid by Rabindranath Tagore when he envisioned Santiniketan—which features on the ARTRAC list— as a meeting place for the languages and cultures of India. Tagore’s invitation to the French Indologist Sylvian Levi (1863-1935) to Santiniketan in 1921 “may be

termed as the starting of scientific studies on Indo-Tibetan Studies at Visva-Bharati” (Loseries 2010, 58–59). In 1954, the Department of Indo-Tibetan Studies was established to “promote research on age-long cultural relations between India and Tibet.” From its establishment through the 1980s, the Department invited Tibetan Buddhist monks, many of whom had come into exile in the 1950s, to collaborate with Indian scholars (Dash, Narendra [2000] 2017b; [2000] 2017a; Loseries 2010).

Among the Tibetan lamas who served at the Department was Chimed Rigzin Rinpoche (1922–2002), popularly known as C.R. Lama, a non-celibate Tantric master in the Nyingma tradition, who served as the first head of the Department (1954–1987) and helped build its manuscript and xylograph collection, with manuscripts he had brought out of Tibet forming its foundation (Yachin and Fischman 2022; Dash, Narendra [2000] 2017b). Lama was the first Tibetan to hold such a position in an Indian university and was part of the delegation that met Zhou Enlai at Visva-Bharati during the latter’s visit to India in 1956, where Nehru himself accompanied him.

Another illustrious Tibetan scholar who served at Santiniketan was Lama Chimpa (1923–2011), who was born in Inner Mongolia and received his basic education there before moving for further monastic studies to Beijing and subsequently to two important Geluk monasteries in Tibet— Kumbum and Drepung. (Sera, Drepung, and Ganden are the “great three” Geluk monastic universities of Central Tibet.) Lama Chimpa came to India in 1951. He worked at the International Academy of Indian Culture in Nagpur and Delhi (1952–61) and taught at the Department of Buddhist Studies—also on the ARTRAC list— at the University of Delhi.^x He subsequently taught Tibetan language and literature at Visva Bharati from 1962 till his retirement in 1993 (Gerke, Barbara 2000; Das, Ritiman 2022; Kravchenko and Zaitsev 2003; Tan 1999).

Another Tibetan lama, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, was born and studied in Golok in Amdo. Following the political upheaval in Tibet, he came to Sikkim in 1957 and moved to India in 1958. He taught at Lucknow University (1967–76) and Visva Bharati (1976–80) before moving to the United States in 1980 (*Snow Lion Publications* 1986).

Conclusion

Thanks in large part to the work of Tibetans in exile and the support from successive Indian governments, there is no location more advantageous than India for studying Tibet and the Himalaya. Indian institutions — national- and state archives, and private collections in libraries and individual families — house the richest material for this research. Linguistic and field expertise abound, as do opportunities for learning the Tibetan language.

In the end, the Himalaya is not, and never was, an insurmountable “natural barrier”—a sentry as Indian school children sing in *sare jabaan se achcha*^{xi}— that separated India from its neighbours in the north and the east. It behoves us then, as Indian scholars, policymakers, and administrators, to approach our border regions, not as foreign and mythologised others, nor as sterile but strategically vital spaces, but as hosts to interconnected yet internally diverse ecologies, societies, and politics that crisscross many contemporary borders, and are often ensconced in a Tibetan and Buddhist cultural sensibility.

Let us broaden the mandate for Tibetology and write more of India into the story. Let us ask of it lessons about our shared histories, and not just about how best to counter an ‘other’ beyond the mountains.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Personal interview, 3 September 2020.

ⁱⁱ Personal interview, 5 September 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Indian borders are primarily manned by four paramilitary forces, viz., Border Security Force, Assam Rifles, Sashastra Seema Bal, and Indo-Tibetan Border Police.

^{iv} See, Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, 'The Fear of Being Compared: State-Shadowing in the Himalayas, 1910–62', *Political Geography* 75 (1 November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102050>; Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, 'Nation-Building or State-Making? India's North-East Frontier and the Ambiguities of Nehruvian Developmentalism, 1950-1959', *Contemporary South Asia* 21, no. 1 (2013): 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2012.757581>. See also, Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Sino-Indian Border Infrastructure in the Indian Defense Ministry's Year End Review', *The Diplomat*, 28 December 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/sino-indian-border-infrastructure-in-the-indian-defense-ministrys-year-end-review/>.

^v See, Tsering Shakya, 'The Development of Modern Tibetan Studies'. Shakya identified four aspects of the Western approach to the study of Tibet, or the Himalaya more broadly: missionary, diplomatic, journalistic, and social scientific, and added a fifth: travelogue.

^{vi} Personal interview, 29 August 2020.

^{vii} In the fall of 2020, I interviewed Aniket Alam, Dibyesh Anand, Sonika Gupta, Tsering Shakya, and Siddiq Wahid, for an article on Tibetan studies in India, co-authored with Swargajyoti Gohain; Gohain interviewed Tenzin Lekshay and Ngawang Samten. Subsequently, we also interviewed Tanka Subba and M.N. Rajesh. Parts of the section on the state of the field are revised from the co-authored article with Swargajyoti Gohain (manuscript under review) and my doctoral dissertation, Swati Chawla, 'Himalayan Strivings: Bhutan, Sikkim, and Tibet at the Twilight of Empire' (University of Virginia, 2022).

^{viii} The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, preached his first sermon on "Turning the Wheel of Dharma" at Sarnath.

^{ix} I am indebted to Madhura Balasubramaniam for this reference.

^x The Department of Buddhist Studies at Delhi University was inaugurated by Vice President S. Radhakrishnan to mark the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth (and enlightenment and death) in 1956; it became an independent university department in 1962. V.V. Gokhale, the first professor and head of the Department (from 1960), was also an alum of Shantiniketan and part of the Indian Mission in Lhasa as an Officer on Special Duty in 1948-50 (Shendge 1993).

^{xi} "That tallest of all mountains/ Sharing its shade with the sky itself./ It is our sentry./ "It is our watchman" (my translation). Original, "*parbat vo sab se un̄chā/ ham-sāya asmāñ kā/ vo santari hamārā/ vo pāsbañ hamārā*" (Iqbal, n.d.) Originally titled "Tarana-e-Hindi" or "Anthem of the Hind," "*Sare Jahan Se Achchha*" was written as a nationalistic song for children in 1904. An excerpted version of the text is widely sung to this day.

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