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Interpretation of Life Stories as Strategy for Survival
A case of Tibetan refugees from Ladakh, (India)

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.....To my adorable sister, Koumudi

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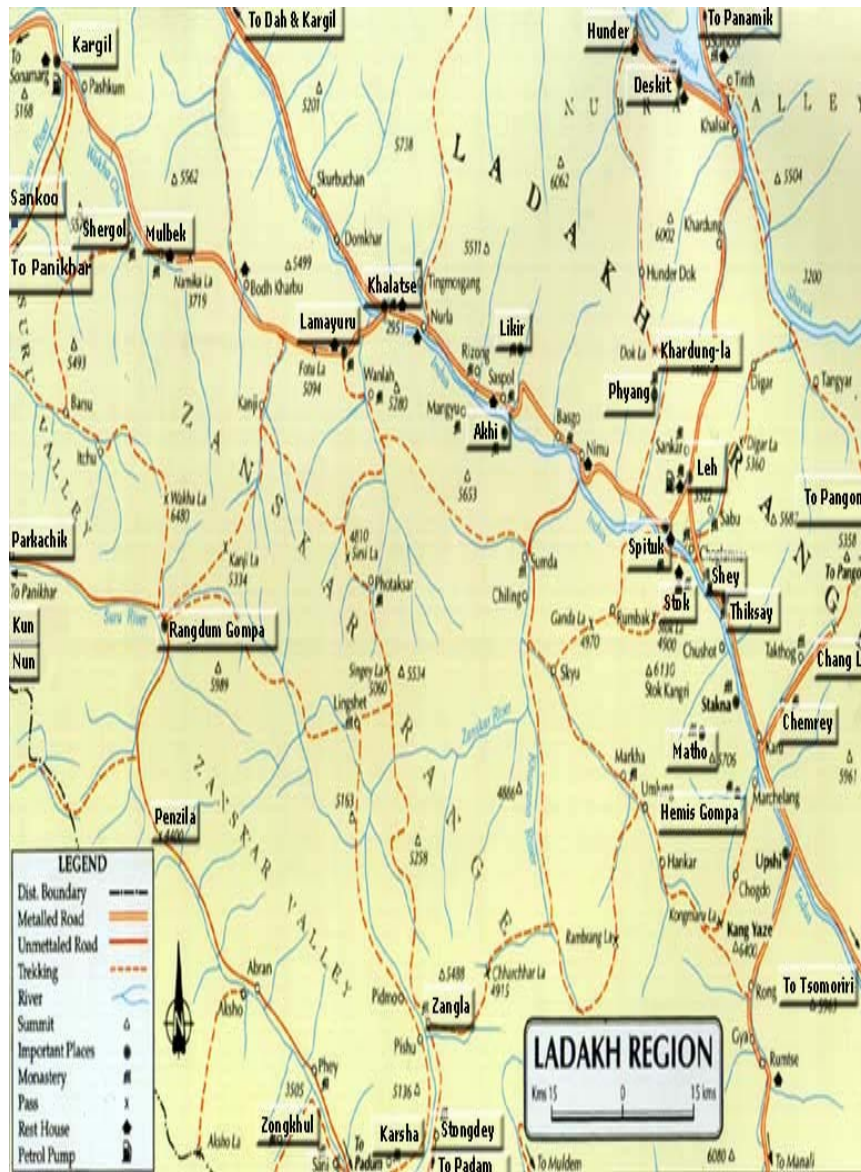
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The Region of Ladakh



Abstract

How individuals interpret their life stories gives an insight into how they perceive their reality. While the previous research on Tibetan refugees shows them as one of the better placed refugees, is this the reality the Tibetan Refugees perceive as well? How do Tibetan refugees(TR) perceive their reality as part of the Tibetan Diaspora and the causal relations TRs draw describing the influence of an event on their livelihoods is the main focus of this paper. Defining for oneself ones identity as refugees, understanding for oneself why one is a refugee and believing that as refugee one is vulnerable, deprived, is deserving of protection and sympathy is the most basic survival strategy adopted by the Tibetan refugees. Such identity construction leads to multiple layers of inclusion and exclusion thus creating what is termed as graded citizenship. These layers create diverse possibilities for claim and support at different levels of inclusion. Through the interpretation of the life stories of the Tibetan refugees, from the Changtang region, Ladakh, India, I argue that creating a narrative identity itself is a survival strategy on which lies the foundation of the livelihood strategy.

Chapter: 1

Framing identity as a survival strategy

1.1: Introduction

According to Said (1998), *“Identity as such is as boring a subject as one can imagine. Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissist self study that today passes in many places as identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum beating nationalism and so on. We have to defend people and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior, but that is very different from aggrandising a past invented for the present reasons.”*

Narrative identity refers to the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others. Beginning in adolescence and young adulthood, our narrative identities are the stories we live by. The narration of the life story involves an interpretive process of self-making through which individuals highlight significant experiences from the past and infuse them with self-defining meaning in the present by interpreting them as having a causal impact on the growth of the self (Pals, 2006).

Pals (2006), in her own research has tried to use the causal connections within life stories, to examine individual differences in how negative, emotionally challenging experiences – life’s lowest moments relate to self-making and growth within the life story. She argues that *“if one overreaching goal of self making within the life story is to construct a sense of positive growth and self development, then negative experiences constitute a rich source of variability in how they might be interpreted as affecting this goal. On the one hand they threaten the coherence of self and the assumptions that provide meaning in life, but on the other they have*

been shown to be a powerful source of resilience, growth and transformation.”

The way people interpret their life stories either enhances or limits their development at material and non material levels. Each individual creates his/her individual stories based on his/ her interpretation of life events and circumstances. Same event would lead to different interpretation by different individuals that go into creation of one's own life story. According to Erickson (1963), adolescent and young adults are challenged to create meaningful answers to the twin identity questions....who I am? How do I fit in the world? A key part of the process is the construction of a self - defining life story.

1.2: Narrative identity and Livelihood

Livelihood is not just a composition of material base and is not only constructed from assets but also from cultural values and identities. Narrative identity is a way of defining for oneself ones position in the society, which further places people in social categories and helps society to bring order within the society. Labelling or identifying people by the occupation has been the most elementary way of class stratification. Occupation or the work one does or did constitutes an essential component of defining oneself. Many communities like the Parsi community in India have surnames that signifies their occupation, thus surnames like Batliwala(one who trades in bottles), Dabbawala(one who supplies lunch boxes) are common surnames amongst the community. Similarly within the Hindu community, in the state of Maharashtra, Kumbhar surname refers to the occupation of potter, Mali surname refers to the occupation of a gardener.

Such occupational categories are a common feature of South Asian village life and indeed of village studies. Epstein (1962), for example, listed: Priest, Peasant, Goldsmith, Blacksmith, Oilpresser, Washerman, Shepherd, Stonecutter, Basketmaker and Untouchable as the occupational-household-

types found in the village of Dalena in South India where she undertook research (Seeley 2000).

The Indian Census in 2001 had livelihoods as a basis of classification of the population. Thus questions like whether they had worked any time last year, if worked the category of the economic activity, the actual occupation of the person, nature of industry, trade or service, class of worker, non-economic activity of those who had not worked at all last year and whether seeking/available for work were asked. From such questions statistics are derived on the numbers of `cultivators`, `agriculture labourers`, those involved in `livestock, forestry, fishing`, mining and quarrying`, `in household industry`, `construction`, `trade and commerce` `transport` and `other services.` Figures are also given for `marginal workers` and `non-workers` (Indian Census Report 2001).

To be a `Cobbler` is more than an occupation: it is also an identity - An identity that defines one's place in the world. The construction of a livelihood and the term used to define or summarise the livelihood of a person or household is important in terms of cultural meaning and identity. According to Srinivas (1976), *“A man inherited an occupation, and the skills and secrets involved in its practice were transmitted to him by his father, uncle or older brothers. There was a feeling that the traditional occupation was the proper one for members of the caste, and there was pride in the skill required for it as well as a sense of importance. While occupational specialisation resulted in the interdependence of castes, hierarchical ideas, especially as expressed in endogamy and the restrictions of inter-dining, emphasised their separation from each other”*. The class - cast stratification of the people based on the means of livelihoods they follow is a common feature of most of the south Asian countries and the distribution of resources based on such stratification is considered to be one of the reasons why a certain communities always remained marginalised. Thus in India a person from the Dalit community was denied education and

thus was refrained from creating an asset based on educational qualification. The term Scheduled Castes is the official term for people variously called Dalits, Harijans and untouchables. The Schedule is a list held in each state of castes entitled to parliamentary seats, public employment and educational benefits because of their lower status and marginalisation in society. While until Independence having an identity of lower cast was a thing to be ashamed of and something to be hidden, today with the various affirmative actions taken by the government of India, even the ones from the higher castes create fake identities to get the benefits of such reservations. Thus individuals pick on multiple identities based on convenience and circumstances (Deshingkar and Johnson 2003).

Similarly women have been denied the land rights or the property rights (Agarwal 1994), Further what a citizen of a country can own cannot be owned by a non citizen. Nationality is the legal bond that guarantees individuals the full enjoyment of all human rights as a member the political community and thus having a national identity of a nation gives the rights to have all other rights.¹ It has been commonly seen that the persons from lower strata, the nomads are either denied access to natural and community resources or are given poor quality resources. They live in the fringes and have infertile land, no source of water and other infrastructure. Thus while the Livelihoods frameworks places emphasis on the livelihoods assets, it completely undermines the social structure and power dynamics that affects and influences the distribution and ownership of the livelihoods assets (Murray 2001, Ellis 1988). Thus the entitlements have depended on the cast, class, gender, cultural, religious, and nationality based identity. Cultural affinities, religious affinities, class and cast identities determine

¹ The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) issued a landmark decision on October 7, 2005, affirming the human right to nationality as the gateway to the equal enjoyment of all rights as civic members of a state.

nature of trust and entitlements one would get in a given power structure of a region (Mendelsohn, Oliver, Vicziany 1988),

In this paper I argue that defining 'who I am' decides 'what I get'. Identity that we create for ourselves and for the others creates entitlements and rights that are given to us and the ones that we claim. This identity of 'who we are' further creates the notions of right and wrong that influence our choice of livelihoods. Thus as a follower of Buddhism or Jainism, one would not think of a earning a livelihood through violence. So one denies the occupations like that a butcher, army personnel, farming because ones religious identity of being a Buddhist or a Jain, does not approve of it. The class, cast, status identity further classifies livelihoods as that which befits ones cast – class status and one that does not. Thus through the interpretation of one's identity one either opens or closes the livelihoods options for oneself and also justifies ones choice of livelihood source such that it does not confront with ones established identity (Karanth, Ramaswamy, Högger, 2004)

While being refugee is an external identity conferred upon the individuals based on which their right to livelihoods are affected by way of what they can own and not own, jobs they can apply for and not apply for, places they can work in and not work in, there are layers of self created identities which also add to the limits and the scope of earning a livelihoods through a particular means. The notions of trust, mistrust, inclusion and exclusion influence livelihoods assets – to be eligible for credit one would have to prove ones reliability and this would depend on the identity one holds.

As such the narrative identity becomes a way in which an individual projects himself or herself by narrating his or her life story. An individual through his or her own interpretations of the life story creates and identity that further creates layers of inclusion and exclusion and thus qualifying his or her case for owning or building a livelihood asset. A narrative identity

constitutes of interpretation of the past, connecting the past events to the current state of being and draws conclusions for the future.

Through the analysis of the narrative trajectory of the first and the second generation of Tibetan refugees, this paper would look for the causal connections Tibetan refugees draw through the interpretation of their life stories that defines why they are what they are and justifies their claims as refugees. I assume in this paper that given the state of vulnerability that refugees experience in the wake of statelessness, they interpret their life story in ways that creates a strong case for their inclusion within and protection of the host country and negotiate a share in resources of the host population to draw their livelihoods.

Chapter 2

Research Methodology

2.1: Research Question

The research question that this paper seeks to answer is, *how does the identity manifest in the livelihoods strategy of the Tibetan Refugee?*

2.2: The narrative identity framework – Life story model

Narrative inquiry rests on the assumption of the storied nature of human experiences (Sarbin¹, 1986). Narrative in a broad sense encompasses approaches and traditions that focus on personal experience as experienced or communicated in language. This then includes case studies, life histories, autobiographies, psychobiography, ethnography, discourse analysis and other related approaches and traditions that tend to emphasize qualitative over quantitative analysis, hermeneutics over hypothetico – deductive strategies of inquiry.

The life story as a narrative form has evolved from the oral history, life history, and other ethnographic and field approaches. It is a qualitative research method for gathering information on the subjective essence of one person's entire life. (Atkinson, 1998). Stories are told to an audience – there is a particular setting in which a story is told and emerges in ongoing conversations and within evolving social relationships. History and culture shape the stories people tell themselves. The extent to which narrative identities espouse unity or multiplicity in the self is debatable. Another dilemma concerns the relative contribution to narrative identity of individual self agency on the one hand versus the impact of society and social context on the other. The third debate that comes through the literature on narrative identity is regarding the stability and continuity of the self versus the extent to which they show personal growth and development (Adams, Josselson, Lieblich 2006).

2.3 : Research tools

Essentially an ethnographic study, I have adopted qualitative methods of research. The main source of information has been interviews that followed an autobiographical narration as the answers to questions posed to the interviewee. The basic unit of analysis is thus the life stories narrated by the first and second generation Tibetan refugees, from the Changtang region of Ladakh.

The narration was however controlled by the nature of questions asked so as to direct the life story to a particular aspect of the life story and that is 'earning livelihoods as a refugee'. How far such a control over the narration is justifiable is certainly debatable, but since *life stories that is provided in an interview is one instance of the life story, the particular life story is one instance of the polyphonic versions or possible constructions of people's selves and lives*², a life story would always have underlining thread that would maintain the coherence within the life story. One life story can be narrated from different angles highlighting different aspects, phases and circumstances in a life span of the individual. Thus I find it necessary to frame the questions in such way that the life story would be told from a specific angle, important for the research.

Often the reliability of life story as a coherent, authenticate and factual source of information becomes a point of debate. According to Holstein and Gubrium, reliability of the life story depends on the extent to which there is a consistency in the answers given to a particular question when never and wherever it is asked. It thus is important to interpret the life story interview against quantitative standards of analysis. This however, according to me, is mistrusting the life stories told. There can be inconsistency between what is

² Multiplicity and Conflict in the Dialogical Self: A life narrative approach, Peter T.F. Raggatt

narrated through a life story and what exists, but that itself is the reason to analyse the life story – that is to bring forth the paradox about the way the reality is narrated and the way the reality actually is. It's only due to the subtle manipulations and 'add on' that an individual adds to the story that gives it a form of conscious reinterpretation of a reality. It's the understanding of these consciously chosen facts and their interpretation within a narrative that makes it an individual's strategy to attain a particular goal - that may be healing, justifying, or getting aid or support. Thus I have at no point tried authenticating the facts with any other quantitative data, but have only tried to bring forward the nature of interpretation of the stories and the reality.

Since I want to study the aim of this research is to study the connection between the life story interpretation and livelihoods assets creation, I have divided the interviewees into three distinct categories of Tibetan Refugees – nomadic pastoral Tibetan refugees, TRs following agriculture and the third those were into self employed engaged in trading and those who were into the government or semi government sector.

According to a rough estimate that was given by the settlement office, Choglamsar, on livelihoods profile of TRs from the Changtang region, most of the TRs are engaged in manual labour, Agriculture and pastoralist activities. Around 10% of the TRs are estimated to be engaged in government service, private sector, or are self employed.

Bulk of the interviews is individual interviews however at certain occasions I have also adopted the tool of focus group discussion to understand the group perceptions of their reality. I conducted three focus group discussions – one with the Nomads group from the Sumdo settlement, camping at Thasang, the farmers from Hanley settlement and a group of youth from the Nyoma settlement. In all this study is based on the analysis of life stories told by 14 individuals from four settlements – three settlements from

Changtang, viz. Nyoma, Sumdo and Hanley and the Choglamsar settlement. The table below shows the age, gender, work profile of the interviewees.

2.4 : Limitations of the research

Not knowing Tibetan language was the biggest barriers more so because I have used the life story as the basic tool of analysis. There are definitely many finer nuances that have got filtered out in the process of translation.

The logistical arrangement, getting the permissions to travel along the border, tracking the nomads led to delays and which made it difficult spend extensive time with the interviewees so as to give them enough time to recollect and narrate life stories at length. It was more of controlled narration and at many a times I intervened to direct a course of the narration due to times constraints.

2.5 About the region of study - Changtang, Choglamsar and Leh

The Tibetan Refugees from Ladakh are the least represented TR's in India. According to Prost(2006), *"In my own experience, most Tibetan refugees are not like these, and certainly do not live in Dharmasala, but in rather non – cosmopolitan agricultural and craft communities. They tend to be humble and self – effacing, conservative, often uncritically devoted to their leaders, seemingly as avid about watching Hindi films as attending religious ceremonies, and they have Hindi or Nepali, not English as their second language. Why are these many Tibetan exiles left backstage or merely out in the audience in the study of 'Tibetan culture'?"*

The Tibetans from the western Tibet were the pastoralists and followed a nomadic way of living. They belonged to the relatively marginalised groups within Tibet and had remained in Tibet until the 1962. Unlike rest of the Tibetans these groups had no financial assets when they reached India. (Goldstein & M. Beall, 1986)

The Changtang region of Ladakh is by way least represented region in India itself. It's a border region of India, sharing its border with now Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The remoteness of the region, harsh climate, marginalisation and dependency on agriculture and pasturage as the main source of livelihoods, were the primary reasons for the selection of Changtang Tibetan settlements as the field area.

The Tibetans in Changthang³ area are at 9 different places - Hanley, Chumur, Sumdho, Nyoma, Chusul, Kagshung, Samed, Puga, Kharnak. Out of these Hanley, Sumdho and Nyoma were the settlements selected for the research. Selection was based on the sources of livelihoods followed in these settlements and closeness to the border. Hanley settlement is right at the Indo – Sino border constitutes of semi nomads, Sumdo is totally Nomadic and Nyoma is semi nomadic. The Nyoma settlement falls in the Nyoma block. As a block⁴ Nyoma has some basic facilities like the STD telephone service, internet service, medical facilities, a central school, Jammu and Kashmir state government high school, middle school and headquarter of Indo Tibet Border Force (ITBF). Hanley and Sumdo settlements do not have access to any such facilities baring the Tibetan Children's Village school. Almost all the Tibetan settlements in Ladakh have a TCV school and this forms a basic unit of networking in this remote region.

Hanley is 60kms away from Nyoma and 201 kms away from Leh which is the capital town of Ladakh. Sumdo is 20Kms from Nyoma. Distance between Nyoma and Leh is 182Kms. A Jammu and Kashmir state transport bus plies between Hanley and Leh via Nyoma once a week on Sunday. Besides this other modes of transport are privately owned vehicles, ITBF

³ Changtang is a mountainous plateau 14,000 feet above sea level, extending into India, in the Ladhak region of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

⁴ Block is a second line of state administration, followed by village.

trucks (if allowed). Many of the nomads from Sumdo still use horses and sometimes cover the distances walking. Leh is the nearest market place for all these three settlements.

The livelihood of the people in former five camps depends on both agriculture and livestock and the other four camps depend only on livestock like goat, sheep, yak, dri and horse. The cooperative society supplies ration, fodders and other essential commodities. Weather in Changtang is extreme, reaching 40~C in summer and -40~C in winter. The land is fragile and sparsely vegetated. The Changthang Tibetan Settlement was started in the year 1982 with the population of 1978 Tibetans then. Today the population of the settlement is 2287 and main source of livelihood comprises of agriculture and pasturage.

The Changtang and Rupchu areas accommodate 41 villages and hamlets with a total population of 8,000-odd settled and nomadic (indigenous) residents and 1,500 Tibetan refugees. The latter crossed the borders during the early 1960s. The population growth rate is estimated to exceed 2.8 per cent. This is resulting in new settlements being built, new suitable lands being converted into agricultural fields and brooks being diverted to irrigate these areas. The area also holds a substantial number of domestic animals. The Changtang area alone maintains an estimated 140,000 livestock population, 90 per cent comprising of sheep and goat and the remaining 10 per cent yak, zo (crossbreed between yak and cow) and ponies. These animals directly compete with the wild ungulates such as the Tibetan wildass, blue sheep, Tibetan argali or the rare Tibetan gazelle. The continuous growth of the domestic livestock increases not only pressure on herbivorous wildlife, but also leads to heavily overgrazed pastureland, resulting in wind erosion and accelerated devastation⁵.

⁵ www.peopleandplanet.net/doc

The Changpa, nomadic pastoralists who originally migrated from Tibet in the eighth century A.D (Jina 1995) graze the rangelands of Changtang. The Changpa are Buddhists and share cultural and linguistic affinities with Tibet (Rizvi 1996). They lost access to several traditional pastures on the Tibetan side when India and China fought a war in the region in 1962 (Ahmed 1997). Around the same time the Indian side saw a heavy influx of Tibetan refugees, who like the Chnagpa, rear a variety of livestock including horse, yak, sheep and goat. The studies have shown considerable social, economic and land tenure changes, particularly during the period after the war between India and China (Saberwal 1996, Jina 1999, Chaudhari 2000). Very little information is however available from the region, especially the eastern Hanley Valley bordering China, a remote area which is out of bounds for foreign nationals and for which the Indian nationals require a special permit.

The region is experiencing a pressure from the rising livestock population which is attributed to besides other factors, to the arrival of TRs with their livestock.

Chapter 3

Identity construction and Refugee discourse

3.1: Identity and the question of Refugees

According to Souguk (1999) the term “Refugee” makes sense only when it is juxtaposed to its opposite a “Citizen” residing in his or her own “state”. Refugees are thus defined as by what they lack – a state – and in so doing they reinforce the state’s centrality. Refugee discourse defines “refugeeness” as an “abnormal” situation. In so doing it defines “normality” as a situation in which citizens reside in their own territorially bounded state. By emphasizing “statelessness” as the refugee’s essential characteristics refugee discourse defines “state” as the sole legitimate form of political organization and “citizen” as the only form of individual existence.

Identity however is a multi dimensional, dialogical and narrative engagement with the world having multiple origins and trajectories. Personal positioning refers to how individuals privately organise, evaluate and narrate their lives in a moral framework. Social positioning arises from societal influences external to the person, operating from the outside, shaping their experiences and their stories. Social positioning is explicit and more defined when there are power struggles in social hierarchies or dichotomies. Thus the dominant term refugee would be defined as having properties lacked by the opposite term - Citizen, with the result that individuals and groups can be silenced or oppressed. (Herman, 2001)

Reality is constructed through the interpretation of one’s life story and not necessarily be the reality. This interpretation is further based on the goals to be achieved and the circumstances. An interpretation of the past for the present, creating shapes and meanings consistent with the present makes a diaspora. More than being a lived reality it is a space that is consciously created as a part of a broader scheme to insert continuity and coherence into

the life stories broken under the conditions of displacement, migration and exile. It constitutes of categorical images of homelands, traditions, collective memories and formidable longings. It is a category of awareness in which present tense practices attain significance out of the interpretation of the past.

While the refugee discourse divides the world into a bipolar entity, there are arguments advocating the need to understand ‘citizenship’ as a multi-layered construct, in which one’s inclusion in collectivities in the different layers – ‘local’, ‘ethnic, national’, ‘state’, ‘cross – or trans – state’ and ‘supra- state’ – is affected and often at least partly constructed by the relationship and positioning of each layer in specific historical context. (Davis, 1999).

The term ‘refugee’ is based on a conceptualization of ‘refugeeness’ that cannot be understood only in terms of ‘flight and displacement of particular individuals and groups’ . It is also based on how the daily practices of living, networking, forming relationships, and constructing identities that refugee experience and take part in as they live in one or several host-societies. In other words, being a refugee is not a simple identity construct that emerges from one or several experiences of violence, war, persecution and displacement from the homeland (Al – Sharmani, 2004). It’s a “process of becoming a gradual transformation, not an automatic result of the crossing of a national border” (Malkki 1995).

3.2 Identity and the question of refugee livelihoods

Refugees are often part of transnational family households whose members make joint decisions and partake in collective efforts to secure livelihood for family members as they live and move in different nation-states. Moreover, the needs, challenges, and aspirations of these individuals and their families go beyond the context of the current host society. Infact, they are shaped by

present and past diasporic experiences as well as the refugees' life experiences in the homeland (Al-Sharmani 2004).

In the absence of economic capital, which usually is the case with the refugee communities, creating symbolic capital becomes important in order to create livelihood sources. This symbolic capital gets transferred into economic capital that builds the foundation of refugee livelihoods (Prost 2006). In his paper 'The problem with 'rich refugees' sponsorship , capital and the informal economy of Tibetan refugees, Prost (2006), refers to symbolic capital to the particular disposition and characteristics of individuals which come to validate their status as 'Tibetan refugees', and make them worthy recipients for financial sponsorship in the eyes of foreign donors.

The Tibetan refugees gradually learn to conform to expectations of a 'clientele' of aid: 'Tibetans who do not 'adapt' to the way things work in exile express a fear of personal failure with coping in the new system altogether, their young continually compete for the attention of aid organisations (De Voe,1981).

Taking this as the point of departure it can be argued that the creation of symbolic capital is dependent on the way the Tibetan refugees interpret and tell their life stories as refugees, making them worthy not only of sponsorship and financial aid but even to inclusion in the host society. It's this interpretation of one's life story that entails them to the claims over resources and rights as refugees.

As individuals what one does for livelihoods forms an essential identity. In the traditional societies the family names described the nature of livelihood the person followed. It is not clear from the current literature on Tibetans if they had similar system, but it's clear that there definitely is a class differentiation based on the livelihoods followed by the people. Thus how

we earn our living gets into defining ‘what we are’ and ‘what we are’ further contributes to our livelihood.

3.3: Identity and the question of rights

The seeming naturalness and inevitability of the formations of diasporas and theorising immigrant communities as diasporas, are part and parcel of global and hegemonic discourse of identity. Once institutionalised as natural, the discourse about identities creates ever increasing claims about cultural distinctiveness and group rights. Ethnic and national identities are enacted and improvised for mobilising and making claims, in national and world politics authenticating diasporas as an idiom for the politics of identity.

On the other hand as exercised in individual collective actor’s narratives and strategies, identity also authorises ethnic nationalism and sovereignties. Thus while rights acquire a more universalistic form and are divorced from national belongings, thus giving rise to more inclusionary forms of membership, identities become intentionally particularistic and exclusionary practices .

Universal right to one’s own culture has gained increasing legitimacy, and collective identity has been redefined as a category of human rights. What are considered particularistic characteristics of collectives – culture, language, and standard ethnic traits – have become variants of the universal core of humanness or selfhood. This identity represents the unchosen and is naturalised through the language of kinship, homeland, nation and territory. One cannot help but have identity (Anderson, 1993).

The post-war reification of personhood and individual rights expands the boundaries of political communities by legitimating individual’s participation and claims beyond their membership status in a particular nation state. With the breakdown of a link between national community and rights, arise multiple forms of citizenship that are no longer anchored in

national collectives and that expands the sets of rights bearing within and without nation states. The forms are exemplified in the membership of the refugees living in a protracted state of statelessness, who hold various rights and privileges without a formal nationality status.

Thus it can be concluded that identity construction determines the nature of rights claimed and creates multiple layers of identity creation creates a bases for livelihoods assets creation.

3.4: Identity and the case of Tibetan refugees

It is estimated that there are approximately 130,000 Tibetan refugees, of which 95% live in the South- Asian states of India, Nepal and Bhutan and majority of them live in the refugee settlements spread throughout these countries.

It is argued that it is not only Westerners who have exoticised Tibet and the Tibetans; the Tibetan diaspora too have invested heavily in such (neo) orientalist representation strategies for their own tactical purposes. (Routray and Namgail 2007). In the Tibetan case, the term diaspora, denotes processes of 'enforced migration', 'identity fragmentation and reconstruction', 'transnationalism' and the 'goal of returning back to homeland'. (Anand 2000).

It is important to understand that Tibetans have explicitly voiced their 'goal of free Tibet' and that being away from home they are fighting a 'non – violent war for freedom'. Kolas (1996). However there is also a growing realisation among the Tibetan refugees that the goal of returning to Tibet is too far-fetched in the foreseeable future. In such a scenario a construct of homeland becomes all the more important. The Tibetan diaspora should be seen as a particular social form, a type of consciousness and a mode of cultural production (Anand, 2000).

Several factors influences and shape Tibetness, including their refugee status; space–time projections of homeland, the overriding need for the preservation of their culture; the Western audience’s preconceived notions of Tibet and Tibetans; the community’s self-perception; the personality of Dalai Lama; the attitude of host governments and, most importantly; the desire to project a sense of continuity in a changing external environment (Dodin, Thierry, Heinz Räther 2001).

The retention of refugee status rather than the taking-up of the citizenship of the host country is seen as a highly patriotic act, especially since their refugee status severely restricts the right of Tibetans to own immovable property.(Houston, Serin and Richard Wright 2003). While influences of popular Indian culture, including Bollywood, are marked among the Tibetan refugees, a sense of separate and distinct identity is prevalent. Both in rhetoric as well as in practice, the Tibetan refuge community, has largely avoided the process of ‘Sanskritisation ’ that affects most minority groups in India (Anand 2000). The projection of Tibet in India and the nomenclature of establishments here.” *illustrates the need to create familiarity in a strange environment, and maintain the memory of homeland This diasporic longing for homeland is recreated in expressive artistic production in the refugee community*”(Anand 2000)

While tourism and comodification are important factors behind the inclusion of the theme of place within the artistic production of the diaspora, one cannot deny the symbolic significance of Tibet as a homeland. Tibet is a land of ‘Snow – lion’, ‘Yaks’, ‘lush green pastures’ and ‘sparkling waters’ (Klieger,Christiaa 2002) .

Chapter: 4

‘The grass was always good in Tibet’

Life story interpretation of the first generation of Tibetan Refugees

In this chapter I present the analysis of the life stories of first generation Tibetan refugees. There are two interviews of the Nomads, two of the farmers, two of them are traders and one interview of the ex army personnel. I have divided the life stories narrated by the first generation Tibetan refugees into three distinct parts – reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future. One can see a distinct division in the above manner within the narratives of first generation. The reconstructed past relates to life in Tibet before coming to India, Present relates to living as refugees in India and future relates to life that could be if they return back to Tibet or continues living in India. I have further divided the interviewees on the basis of livelihood they follow since their most dominant identity after religion and nationality constitutes of how they earn their livelihoods. Interpretation of their life story directly relates to what they do for survival and how their survival has been threatened due to the events in the past.

4.1: Reconstructed past

At the time of this interview, Taming Dolma, pastoralist, had been camping along the banks of Indus River for over 12 days along with five other nomad families. Her tent was a white tent and not the black tent made out of yak wool which they used back in Tibet. *“These tents are not as good as the chipa (yak wool) tents since the chipa tents were water proof, but these days it is difficult to get those chipa tents and we do not have time to weave one for ourselves.”* Ever since they came to India she said they have been using these white tents. *“They do not give enough protection during the winter months and tear off soon, but it’s only the poor nomad who uses the yak wool tents. These white tents have to be bought and only rich nomads can afford such tents. Very few people use yak wool tents these days”.* There are no partitions within the tents. The panel opposite the

entrance is the prayer alters on which the photographs of H.H Dalai lama was neatly placed in a metal frame which is embossed with flowers and petals.

When she came from Tibet she was 15 years old. Now she is 67 years old. *“We had lots of problems when we first came here, but because of Dalai lama now everything is fine. That time there were no vehicles. We had to go on foot everywhere. Now the vehicles have made travelling much easier besides it is now more enjoyable to travel”.*

Tamding Dolma had come from Tibet almost 40 years back, from the Chopu village in Tibet. *“We reared sheep in Tibet too.”* She was not too happy with the availability and the quality of grass in Changtang. *“The grass in Tibet was much better. So we did not have to trek far. Here since the grass is not that good we have to trek up to high mountains in search of good grass”.* She could not really explain what she meant by “good grass” - whether she referred to the nutritional value of the grass or the availability of the grass was not clear. Changtang region in India, however is known for its pastures, but recent studies have shown that over grazing and the sudden rise in the population of the sheep after the coming of the Tibetan refugee has reduced the pastures and the sustainability of these grasslands is currently a major environmental concern (Bhtanagar, Wangchuk, Prins, Wieren, Mishra and 2005). Probably Tamding compared the availability of grass in Tibet that was 40 years back, when she lived in Tibet to what was available now. She probably still carries the image of Tibet that had long stretches of pastures, when she left Tibet and moved into India. Such a comparison of the present with the past reflects on the way the reality is perceived. Well being then becomes relative to what was and what was not available in the past. Tamding Dolma thus projects her present as relatively ‘bad’ in comparison to her ‘past’ and thus generates sympathy.

The Tibetans in Ladakh came in the western Tibet in the wake of Indo China war, in the 60s that is almost a decade after Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet. Narrating her experiences of escaping from a small village Yalunthok in western Tibet, 78 year old Tsering Tondol, said “, *I was 30 years then. I was married and already had two daughters- one was four years and the other two years. The Chinese were being nasty. They would say they were in Tibet to develop Tibet, to eradicate poverty. But they were lying to us. We were not poor. The rich and the educated people were put into jails. They took away our children by force saying they would educate them but our children never returned. We had to leave Tibet*”. From her village that is Yelling Thokese some eight families left for Indian side of Tibet. They took along the sheep and the cattle, horses and Tasma flour for the journey, leaving everything else behind. “*It wasn't possible to carry everything. We left behind our tents, utensils and other household things. We abandoned our fields, and trekked for two months through the mountains to reach Changtang. At times we would walk through the day and through the night. On the way if the Bakra (Sheep) gave birth to the biddu (Lamb) we would leave the biddu on the way. We could not carry it along*”.

She recalled that back in her mother's village people would sieve gold from the streams coming from the gold mines and that was one of the important sources of livelihoods in her village, in Tibet. Besides they would make cheese, butter and trade it for day to day goods required. They would also trade the sheep wool. But after they came to India for first ten years or so there was nothing to do. Lots of their sheep had died on the way to India. “*The grass in India was not as good as it was in Tibet so our sheep had become weak. Slowly we were provided with tents and we lived in the tents for two three years. These tents were to be shared between two or three families. Then the government (Tibetan Government in Exile) built some 'pucca' (concrete) houses. Some 30 families got those houses. Then some people built their own small houses. The only source of income still was selling sheep wool. We would shear the sheep and the ones who had a horse*

would carry the wool to Leh and sell it there. If that was not possible then we would carry wool on our back to Leh. (Leh is 180Kms from Nyoma) and barter it for food, wheat etc. and other necessities. In all it would take 20 to 25 days to go to Leh and return back. The land around was barren. So we tried to cultivate it. The locals resisted initially but after our request and pleading they heeded. The locals here are all Buddhists so they are all compassionate and thus were ready to share their resources with us.”⁶

This first generation had much pain and grief to confront. They had covered an arduous journey through the Himalayas for months to reach Changtang. What they brought with them was their sheep, their only asset and the Tsmipa. Coming to India meant being closer to Dalai Lama, their protector. They found Changtang as an extension of Tibet. The people in Changtang followed Buddhism. This generation was in a state of shock when they reached India and their immediate concern was survival and maintaining whatever little flock of sheep that had survived the long journey. The first ten years neither the Indian government nor the Tibetan government in exile was prepared for this fresh influx of refugees. It was too sudden and too many to handle. India had witnessed the 1962 war with China, something India was not prepared for. Until the Chinese war India had taken a very defensive position on the Tibetan issue. The political scenario changed after the war and the Indo China relations changed. This gained Tibetans more open support from India .This was also the time of famine in India. In such a situation to attend to the needs of refugees at the cost of the citizens was certainly not the priority of any one. More so Ladakh as a region was one of the alienated and remote regions within India.

Norka Chiring, a pastoralist, was 36 years old when he came to India. He is now 84 years. He lived in a village called Rwrok in Tibet. According to

⁶ Tsering Tondol's interview with the researcher

Norka Chiring, *“Chinese people took away our sheep and cattle, they killed our men. So we left. Here we can pray and also meet Dalai Lama. From Tibet we travelled for two three months on Yak and horses. We left all the household things back in Tibet. We brought some basic things on the horse back, that’s it! We reared sheep in Tibet too. We came along with 500 sheep from Tibet but on the way many died. By the time we reached India we were left with only 100 sheep. Only few families had stayed back in Tibet otherwise everyone else from my village had escaped from Tibet. Since we come from the same village in Tibet our story is no different. We all will have same things to narrate to you”*.

The interpretation of stories of Tamding Dolma, Tesring Tondol and Norka Chiring who followed a pastoralist, nomadic or semi nomadic lifestyle certain generalisation about the past come forward. They all reminisce relatively carefree life that they experienced in Tibet. Freedom to go about anywhere was the most prominent aspect of the life in Tibet which they thought they did not have in the present. Almost all of them spoke highly of the natural resources of Tibet. The negative experiences of being in Tibet were associated with the Chinese oppression and the life that followed in the wake of Chinese atrocities. Amongst the most prominent negative memories of the past included atrocities meted out on them by the Chinese , directly or indirectly, being unable to worship Dalia Lama and the treacherous journey they took to India. The biggest loss was the loss of their sheep, which they considered their biggest asset. The reason for the local community’s compassion is their being the followers of Buddhism and they could survive the ordeal only because of the efforts made by Dalai Lama.

All the refugees settled in the Sumudo settlement in Changtang, belonged to the same village in Tibet and escaped together from Tibet. After reaching India some stayed in Khakshung right near the Indo Tibet border and some others moved to Hanley and yet others came to live in Sumdo. *“The Dalai lama told the Indian government that his people were coming in here (to*

Changtang region) and to allow us to live here. Then they had the meeting with the ITBP (Indo Tibetan Border Police) , CRO and the Indian Army and we were given a choice to stay either in Hanley, Numa, Sumdo, Samet , Khanak or in Chusul”, explained Tsawang Tenzin a Tibetan farmer from Hanley settlement. For Tsawang Tenzing, who is now 80 years old, Tibet was good and had fertile land with enough water. “ With the grace of Dalai Lama Tibet had everything. Here there isn’t enough water”. He lived in a village called Chnpa and made it a point to tell that his marriage was a grand affair in Tibet, and that he had never drunk the amount of Chang⁷ he drank that day on his marriage. “We would sing, dance, would gamble,. It was fun in Tibet. We sat on Yak backs and rode them through the wide grasslands. We would celebrate Losar⁸ and Chapa Chonga⁹, when we danced the whole night. On my marriage we had made drums full of Chang. We had very good land in Tibet. People were good there, we could move at our own will. We had more land than what we have here. Now if we go back to Tibet we might not get back our land. What can we do? The Chinese occupied Tibet and we had to move out of our home. Here we have lots of problems. We can’t make our buildings. We have to buy the construction material from the Ladakhis. We are not allowed to make our own bricks. The Poplar tree trucks are to be bought from the Ladakhis. Poplar doesn’t grow well on our land. It’s not good. First the Ladakhis water their farms and then later in the day they release the water to our farms down in the hill. By the time the water is diverted to our fields the flow is less. Last three four years there has been an insect that spoils our crop. It come in like a black cloud and infests the crop. Nothing is growing for last few years. I don’t know the name of the insect but it has feathers and it hops. In that case we report to the government in exile. If they help its good, if they can’t help us then we can do nothing. When we came from Tibet we were 50 people, today we are

⁷ A local bear made of barley.

⁸ New year

⁹ Full moon night

200. *Right now there are 30 households in this settlement. Only one daughter of mine can earn livelihood through farming. She lives with me along with her family. Other three daughters have jobs – one is a nurse, another one is a teacher and one is studying to become a nurse. When we came here we did not know the language. We were not educated. But now all our children and grand children can speak Hindi and they go to schools. That is a good thing. In Tibet we would elect a Gowa who would be the leader of the village. Not everyone likes to take responsibility. Very few people come forward to be a leader. In the village there would be farmers, business men trading in wool, nomads who would graze the sheep. In my wife's village they would sieve gold from the rivers. So they would sell the gold.*"¹⁰

When he came to India along with his family he and his wife being the only adult members of the family go 8 kernels of land each. This land was divided amongst his four daughters when they got married. In the farm they produce wheat which is used for self consumption, the grass goes to feed the sheep. Nothing is sent to the market, infact most of the time there isn't enough for even self consumption. So we have to buy grains from the market. The only source of cash is through the sale of wool. He has 40 sheep and one cow.

*"One of my brother lives in Leh. So we have to travel to give his share of grains to Leh. Travelling is difficult. If we don't get the permission we cannot travel. We have to take permission from the ITBF to travel. Since I know a bit of Hindi and I am old now I am not really harassed by the ITBF men. Mostly the army personnel are good. One odd person turns out be a bully. Otherwise they are well behaved. The biggest risk here is that the border is close by. One doesn't know when there would be a war."*¹¹

¹⁰ Tsawang Tenzing's interview with the researcher

¹¹ Tsawang Tenzing's interview with the researcher

Since the land provided by the Indian government was given only to first generation of Tibetan refugees, sustaining the ever growing population through this fixed land holding is difficult. Being refugees Tibetans cannot buy land and increase their asset base thus sustaining even subsistence way of living is difficult through the land that have. Diversification thus becomes necessary. Many of the Tibetan refugees who initially had come to Changtang have now migrated to Choglamsar or to Leh and earn their livelihoods through trading in woollens and handicrafts.

Sonam Dolma, age 60, though came into India from Changthang , she along with few other families moved to Choglamsar closer to Leh. She has three children, one daughter, and two sons. Like all other Tibetan Refugees she and her husband were given 8Kernel of land each. *“Land is there but nothing grows in it It’s not enough There no water, the land is not fertile. All we grow on the land is the Alfa Alfa. The ladakhis buy it from us as fodder.”* While the grass Alfa Alfa has become a major cash crop in the region, the Tibetan government has been creating awareness regarding the environmental impact of the grass.

She has hired a shop in the Tibetan market in Leh, where she sells woollen clothes, shoes, sleeping bags, cosmetics, track pants and Jackets. She pays Rs10000/¹²year towards the rent of the shop. Her sources of income are – She has two shops, one is managed by her husband the other by her. In the small piece of land that her family was given in the settlement, she grows Alfa Alfa grass and by selling that she earns around Rs 1500/ year. Growing alfa alfa doesn’t require hard labour and it serves as an important cash crop. If business is not good we also go for kuli work.¹³

¹² INR 1 = \$47

¹³ Labour work

From shop on an average they earn around 3000/month, out of which 450/month is spent on travelling, electricity bill around 2400/year, then buying the whole sale stuff for the shop. Health, medicines have to be bought, the treatment is free. Her one son goes as a porter with the trekking groups and that is one important source of income for the family. Another son work runs a cyber cafe in partnership with a ladhakhi friend.

Not all Tibetans have shops. The material for the shop is taken on loan from the whole seller, who usually comes to Leh. But many others prefer travelling to Delhi or to Dharamsala to bring the goods. The wholesaler knows these shopkeepers well so allows them to keep the goods for over six months and sometimes even for a longer period. There is mutual trust and that works well. *“The lala is a very good man. He trusts us. If we say the business this year has not been good, he says we can pay later. We have to at times sell the goods at lower prices since if a good is in fashion a year back and is not sold that year it loses its value. So it’s better to reduce the prices and the sell the stuff rather be adamant and stick to the buying price. They know we are Buddhist and will not cheat him,” says Sonam Dolma. She further adds, “Permits are required but they are not that strict about it these days, It’s only now due to the Olympics that they have again started to check the permits”* She is registered in the camp number 11 which is only on the paper. No one lives in this camp. The ones registered in camp number 11 are mostly business men and they live in Leh in rented houses. However such a registration provides them the benefits of refugees from both the Tibetan government in exile as well the Indian Government. One the most important benefit of being registered as refugee within a authorised settlement makes their children eligible for free education in the Tibetan Children’s Village schools. This provides them with other benefits like getting subsidized ration from the Tibetan Cooperative shops.¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview with Phuntrok Wangmo, Secretary of the Tibetan Cooperative Society, Choglamsar

4.2: Perceived Present

According to Tamding Dolma *“Every month we have to move towards greener pastures. In the summers it’s much easier since there is ample grass but in winters due to snow, sometimes knee deep, there is no grass. The animals die of starvation. Every winter at least 30 odd sheep die for the lack of fodder and cold. So we feed them “Du” (Soaked wheat boiled and made into a kind of a animal feed). This gives them the strength and warmth. But if the goat dies in spite of feeding them with Du then it’s` a double loss – of the goat and all the wheat that went into feeding it.”*

The emphasis is upon the hardships she has to go through and the constant struggle for survival. However the distinction between how far does being refugee adds on to this struggle and how far it is part of the livelihood that she follows gets blurred. Hers is a class which followed the same source of livelihood that they followed before being refugees. As nomads they moved from one pasture to another even while they were in Tibet. Thus as far as the lifestyle and livelihoods is concerned they have not faced categorical change.

They return to the village only once a year during Losar (new year). *“Rest of the year we are in the high mountains, along with our cattle and sheep, living in the tents. The wool (Bal = Goat wool)is sold in the same village every year and to the same person. The one who buys the wool is called Kak. The Pashimina wool which is fine wool, closer to the skin of the sheep has higher value and the traders come to buy the pashimina. Rate varies every year. The goat dung is used as fuel. In the winters the tents tear up and if we are high in the mountains there is no way we can return back to the village. So we gather stones and make temporary walls with the stones and spend the winters in those sheds. During the summer when we return to the village we buy new tent. That takes up lots of money.”*

According to Tamding Dolma the pastures of each village have been divided and if they enter the pastures of other villages a fine has to be paid. This division is made by the local Ladakhis. Within villages the pastures where the TR can graze their sheep is demarcated by the Local Ladakhis. *“This land belongs to the Ladakhis, so if we have to be on their land we have to pay money to them. The authority regarding the distribution of grasslands and water is completely with the Ladakhis. We don’t have any say in those matters and we pay them some money to use their land.”*

Tamding is a pastoralist from the Nyoma settlement. According to her all the negotiations on their behalf, for the pastures to be used and for the farmers regarding water that they can use is done by the ‘Gawa’. These days Gawa is a unanimously elected representative, and is elected on the bases of his abilities and potential to be a leader. Together as a Nyoma village they pay Rs 800/year to the Ladakhis for using their land and resources. *“After paying this tax we get to graze our sheep and cattle in the four locations - winters and summers included. In Tibet there was no question of paying tax. That aside we had all the freedom to go anywhere, besides we had access to far better grass there. The medicine for the sheep is very expensive. Besides there is little information given about what is to be done when a sheep falls ill”.*

They do have some small farm holdings within the settlement, but most of their time goes in rearing the sheep and hence they cannot cultivate the farm. Some people engage in kuli work (construction labour). The youngest daughter of Tamding Dolma does the kuli work and lives a settled life in the Nyoma camp. Tamding Dolma has three daughters and all three are married. Her husband expired few years back and so the middle daughter and her husband live with Tamding Dolma and manage the sheep on her behalf. In the summers they get vegetables. In winters their diet constitutes of meat or

sattu¹⁵ along with goat curds. *“In India one gets good vegetables. In Tibet we did not get such things’*. They have to take permit to travel from one settlement to the other but not when they move to graze their cattle and sheep.

The goat dung is used for self consumption but if there is surplus one can sell it and earn some money out of it too. On an average one sheep gives one kilo of wool once a year. (Though this figure varied from interview to interview). She has 15 sheep and 50 goats, but not all of them are her own. She has the sheep and goats of the other villagers also. These goats and sheep would be taken for grazing by here and in lieu of it she would get grains from the owners of the sheep and the goats. The owners are given the wool extracted from their sheep.

From what Tamding Dolma said, in the Tibetan tradition if a person dies his /her sheep, goats are donated to the village monastery. The Tibetans followed the practice here as well. As a result the monastery in Nyoma now had its own sheep and goats which they give back to the nomads for rearing. Tamding Dolma thus has 90 of the monastery’s sheep this year, for rearing. In return of rearing the sheep of the monastery the nomads get nothing. *“The land we graze our sheep on belongs to the local monasteries. So how can we ask anything in return of rearing their sheep?”* They take turn to rear the sheep. This year it’s the turn of her family and yet another family from the same camp. So she reared 90 sheep and the other family reared 90 sheep of the monastery. *“Since we are refugees and the land belongs to the local Ladakhis and the monastery, it’s a rule that we rear the sheep for the monastery. In return we get nothing. It’s a service we have to do for using their land”*. This rule however came in last year as the population of the sheep in the monasteries grew and it was impossible for the monastery to

¹⁵ flour made of roasted wheat

rear them. They could not even slaughter the animals as it is prohibited by the religion. And since it's the Tibetans who donate them to the monasteries the task of rearing the same was given to the TRs.

For the nomads 90% of the cash income is earned through the sale pashmina, wool and yak wool. This constitutes major source of the cash income. Rest of the income is earned through the sale of goat dung, goat cheese and goat butter or is earned in the form of kind in the form of grains or vegetables which the farmers living in the settlement give to the nomads in return of rearing their sheep. (Namgil, Bhatnagar, Mishra, Bagchi, 2007)

An adult goat produces about 250g of raw cashmere wool per annum. As per a study conducted in the year 2003, a sample 52 TR families sold a total of 1,287 Kg(4.5kg per capita) of cashmere at an average rate of US \$ 25/Kg, this figure is way higher than what a local ladakhi nomad (Chagnpa) earns. Reasons for this difference are cited to improved support system provided to the Tibetan refugee nomads by the Indian government and the Tibetan government in exile. (Namgil, Bhatnagar, Mishra, Bagchi 2007) .

4.3: Anticipated Future

Ten years back Tamding Dolma had been to Chispa a place in Himachal Pradesh to see H.H. Dalai Lama. *“If the Dalai Lama lives here, we will stay. If he returns we too will return, though the chances of that seems to be low. We are happy that we are living close to Dalai Lama. Here we can at least hope to see him. In Tibet we could not even keep his photograph with us”*.

The social, economic and land tenure systems in the area of study in relation to have been changing over past few decades. Reasons for these changes are many - changing environment, increasing population, modernisation to changing priorities, tourism.

According to various environmental studies done in the Changtang region, the human and livestock populations has significantly increased in the last four decades due to factors ranging from better healthcare to the influx of refugees. The growing demand for the pashmina wool has meant that livestock rearing is fast becoming a cash based enterprise that increasingly caters to the lucrative global pashmina market. In this scenario the locals are realising the importance of every bit of pastureland and the Tibetan refugees also see its importance. TRs are viewed as exerting pressure on the pasturelands. There have been considerable social, economic land tenure changes, particularly during the period after the war between India and China (Saberwal, 1996; Jina, 1999; Chaudhari,200). The Hanley valley where part of the study was done is an important area for wildlife conservation. Hunting in the past and excessive livestock grazing in its high altitude habitat has caused considerable threat to the wildlife in the region. The future sustainability and economic viability of pastoralism in the region itself is of considerable concern. As a part of the initial adjustments to the influx of TRs into the local grazing system, an upper limit of 25 livestock per person was agreed upon for the TRs as a livestock – population regulatory mechanism. There is no such restriction for the local Ladakhis.

Taming Dolma says *“We have to follow these rules. If we don’t then we would simply be asked to move out of their land”*. Such rules are made by the local communities and the state per say has no say in such local matters. These fall in the jurisdiction of the village governing bodies – the monastery and the panchayats. *“We have no chance of security. But still we have to live. I am afraid that the Chinese might attack since the border is close by. If we get a chance to settle down then we would love to settle down. But our livelihood demands us to be constantly on a move.”*

After her husband expired ten years back, Taming Dolma divided the sheep amongst her three daughters and herself. She gave 40 sheep to her oldest daughter who lives in another village, now that she is married. The

youngest daughter lives in the camp(settlement camp) and has her own farm so she was given 30 sheep and the rest of the sheep would go to her middle daughter since she and her husband now live with her.

Unlike the rest of Tibetan refugees who came into India along with Dalai Lama in the '50s, the refugees in Ladakh crossed through the border after the Indo China war in 1962. Most of them entered India from the western part of Tibet through the Changtang region of great Tibetan plateau in to Ladakh. Soon they had to confront their new identity - that of a refugee.

For such a community, if they could understand statelessness, would literally mean being 'homeless', 'being at the mercy of others'. Ask them what is meant by refugee and one would get a quick answer "*Refugee means the ones who have no land, no home. The Ladakhis call us Shorpu, which means the ones who have run away. We feel bad when they call us Shorpu. It hurts! If we were not refugees then our mind is happy. As refugees we have to ask the permission from the Ladakhi. If we were not refugees we can go anywhere at our will*", said Dolma, a Tibetan pastoralist, woman of 42 years old, during the focus group discussion, in Thasang.

Leaving 'home' that Tibet was had an emotional and physiological effects on this first generation of refugees. However culturally and environmentally this generation felt "at home" since Ladakh shared similar culture of that as Tibet. Ladakhi's followed Tibetan Buddhism and regarded and still regard Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader as well. Tibetan refugees were the people of Dalai Lama who had to be protected from the 'non believer' Chinese. It was all about sharing the 'little' resources that Ladakhi's had with the Tibetans who were made to leave their home.

According to the pastoralists and the farmers both the future holds very little hope unless they return to Tibet, the chances of which they all agree was bleak. They are concerned about the diminishing pastures, changing attitudes of the Ladakhis with regards to sharing of natural resources, and since

the land is not enough to cater to the growing population survival through the traditional means of livelihoods was difficult in the future.

While the older generation reflects on the days in Tibet, getting nostalgic about the home that they left behind in the hope to see it again. The hope still exists though it has become a bit weak. Most of the first generation of the Tibetan refugees who are now at octogenarians wish if they could at least die in their home land. Almost everyone says it hurts to be way from one's own country. Freedom is what everyone craves for. They were not free in Tibet. They are neither free in India. Only difference is that in Tibet they were terrorised, in India at least they are not terrorised. In spite of spending 30 to 40 long years in India, India still can't become home.

Chapter – 5

From Tsampa to Pizza: The changing identity as refugees

For the ones born in India, Tibet is as mythical as the dragon - an entity to believe in. It's like a place in fairy tale that actually is and if one tries to seek it, one would find it. It has its own government, its own religion, its own unique language and culture; it has its flag, its national anthem. The second generation believes that Tibet would one day reveal itself to them. Now they have Tibetan pop songs, Tibetan music albums and they all are striving for its freedom. This chapter presents the life story interpretations of third generation Tibetan refugees, born and brought up in Changtang, Ladakh. All the interviewees are from one settlement that is Nyoma, currently working in different parts on Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh. They have all studied in the Tibetan Children's Village, SOS school, first in Nyoma, later in Hanley and then in Choglamsar SOS school.

Chawang Namgyal is 25 year old and had joined the Vikas army, which constituted of the Tibetan refugees, in the year 2000. He left the school after completing class 8th and then joined the Army. His parents do farming and has two other brothers. One works in Dehradun Tibetan settlement and has his motor repairing workshop, and the other brother practices Tibetan medicine in Dharamsala. Chawang joined the army for various reasons; the most important reason for him is the facilities one gets by being in the army. It fetches him a salary of 12000/month and besides he gets ample leave, clothes, shoes, subsidized canteen facilities and medical treatment for him and his family. Another reason he mentioned was the growth opportunities that army provides. He can pursue higher education while being in the Army and can get to travel. When asked, wasn't joining the army in contradiction with the non – violent principles of Tibetan Buddhism, he answered back by saying *“that no country can do away with its army. Army is required for the security”*. The next question was obviously where was the country and which nation's security was he talking about? Vikas army which was established in year 1959 has fought wars for India. Chawang justified this 'killing' in the name of security, right now for the host country as part of devel-

oping independent army for the free Tibet. *“Sooner or later Tibet would become free. With the efforts of Dalai Lama we will soon become free. Right now the entire world supports us, America is with us. So once Tibet attains its independence it would need its own army to secure its boundaries. Had we had a strong army earlier we would have never had to leave Tibet and live here as refugees. So I am in the army for Tibet. I am training myself to protect Tibet”*. It is difficult to gauge from what Chawang said as to what was his primary aim to join the Army – a steady source of income or patriotic fervor. He however had strong justification for being in the army and seemed to be proud of his work. Though he has not fought any war as yet he is open to killing and being killed.

The headmaster of the senior section of Choglamsar SOS school however voiced his concern about the increasing number of students joining the Vikas Army. He said *‘they see only easy money and they have a fascination for the uniform. Most of the students from the Changtang are not interested in studies. They drop out from the school. They do not have the ability to lead a nomadic life that their parents lead so the best way out is join the Army. We do not really like it.’*

In the Tibetan SOS school any child irrespective of age would say that *‘Tibetans do not fight. They do not kill’. ‘It’s the Pakistanis and the Chinese who kill. They are bad countries. India is good. Tibet is good’*. The essential identity of the Tibetan that is cultivated in the schools is that of being *‘Compassionate’, ‘hardworking’, ‘peace loving’ people*. The third generation of Tibetan refugees has grown up in the TCV schools. At the age of three every child is admitted to the TCV school and is provided with free education, boarding and food till they finish their secondary school certificate exams. Growing up for this generation is growing up as refugees in these TCV schools. Tibet is in their mind, in the form of an image created by years of schooling in these TCV schools. The schooling is in Tibetan language with higher emphasis on English as the second language than Hin-

di¹⁶. These formative years create strong notions of what is essentially Tibetan and what is not. Thus *'trading as a source of livelihood is good, but trading with a Chinese is bad'*, *'violence is bad but to kill for ones country is good'*, *'Indians are good and the Chinese are bad'*, *'we are refugees and belong to Tibet'*, *'we are not here to stay forever but to return back to Tibet'*, *'Free Tibet will solve all our problems'* are some of the dominant voices within the narrative self of the third generation Tibetan refugees.

Chawang, however has justified his livelihood which is against the basic tenets of Buddhism and what he has been taught in the school, by associating his choice of livelihood with the larger cause of free Tibet. He has positioned his profession as something that is in the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. He goes further by citing the reason of their current status of refugee to the fact that *"Tibet did not have good army to protect itself from the external aggression"*.

A scenario in which an individual is pulled by various forces of moral and traditional values on one hand and survival needs on the other, to do something that does not really conform to the dominant notions of one's community creates confrontation. To be able to justify strongly ones reasons and choices in such situation helps individual reduce the guilt and also create a good enough space for oneself within the community, without compromising upon the material benefits one would accrue by following a livelihood(Erickson, 1982) .

Tenzing Tsogyal, is a 21 years old student of Tibetan Medicine. At the central Tibetan Institute of Buddhist Studies, Leh. He took up this course after he completing higher secondary schooling from the Central Scholl for Tibetans in the Banglore Tibetan refugee settlement. Secondary schooling was done at the SOS school Choglamsar.

¹⁶ The national language of India.

He was always fascinated by the ‘village amchi’, the Tibetan barefoot doctors. One of his uncles was an amchi. Tenzing believes that Tibetan medicine is an efficient way of treating. As a child he had seen how a patient who was not cured by an ‘Indian doctor’ was cured by the amchi. He says it is totally a natural way of curing and based on Ayurved. The course that he is pursuing is a five year course after which he would do one year internship, before he can start his independent practice. Though at the time of interview Tenzing was in the first year of his course, he felt confident of earning his livelihood through practicing Tibetan medicine.

“Today even the western people find this stream of medicine highly effective and scientific. The system is very popular amongst the tourists who come here to Ladakh. I can start an independent practice or I can get a job in Tibetan Astro Institute in Dharmasala. The Tibetan monks have full faith in this system of healing and the monasteries follow Sowa Rigpa that is the Tibetan healing Science.”

He pays a monthly fees of Rs 600/month which is paid by his parents. “Higher education is not subsidized. But it’s not difficult to get the higher education, especially since our entire schooling is free. The standard of education at the SOS schools is very good. So much so that many of the Ladakhi students also study here. That is what I do not understand.... as refugees we should be helped by the locals but on the contrary we end up helping them.” Tenzing takes pride in what he is doing and holds respect for the profession he soon would be practicing himself. While his reason for taking up Tibetan medicine has more to do with his personal experience as a child with his uncle who was an amchi and certain cases that were cured by amchi, he is equally confident of earning a good living after studying Tibetan medicine. There is idealism combined with a practical understanding of future possibilities. His narration expresses satisfaction about what he has got till now by way of free education. He believes that it’s the refugees who are worthy of support and has assumed that locals just because they are the citizens of a country are always better placed than the refugees and thus should be helping the refugees. His speech has claims. There is a sense of

pride which comes from his understanding that ‘despite us being refugees we are capable of sustaining ourselves and also the others’. *“Tibetans do not argue. Being humble, being compassionate, being non violent is what we are taught as Tibetans. I am a Tibetan and I will remain a Tibetan. I get furious when they (The Ladakhi youth) call me ‘Shorpu. I say we are not ‘bhagodas’. We did not leave our country to earn money here in India. We have been forced to flee our country. Our country has been occupied by the Chinese. We are not like the Biharies who have come here to find a job since there is nothing in their own country (State of Bihar). We want to go back to Tibet. This is our freedom struggle”.*

For Tenzing it is clear that he is part of the greater movement for free Tibet. He takes pride in being a Tibetan refugee and differentiates himself from the other migrants in the region who come from Bihar. By positioning himself as Tibetan refugee, ‘fighting the atrocities of the Chinese’ he naturally puts his reason for migration more of a valid reason than that of a Bihari labourer migrating to Ladakh. He relates their state of refugee to a higher cause of ‘Free Tibet’. By stating ‘we are not here to earn money’ he again emphasizes the superiority of his migration, in a way undermining those who migrate for the economic reasons. While Tenzing idealises his state of being a refugee and his reasons for being a refugee as justified he unknowingly justifies the support his community gets as refugees. There is a sense of pride, a sense of superiority over other refugees and migrants in the statements he makes.

Unlike his other fellow friends Tenzing does not wish to apply for the Indian citizenship stating that *“taking citizenship of any other country would be being unfaithful to one’s own country”*. When asked about increased opportunities he might get if he takes on Indian Citizenship he retorted back by saying *“I have ample opportunities even as a Tibetan. If I want I can even be a prime minister of Tibet”*. While Tenzing makes such optimistic and nationalist statements, the other participants form the focus

group discussion feel that there aren't enough opportunities as refugees. They argue that by taking on Indian citizenship they do not become less of a Tibetan, and by doing so they do not depart from the cause of 'free Tibet', but only enhances their own 'growth' opportunities.¹⁷ The question here is not of survival or mere livelihoods but of 'growth'.

Sherab Dorje is 25 years old and has been trained in traditional Thangka painting. He learned the art at Patlikul institute in Manali, Himachal Pradesh. Anyone below the age of 26 years with interest in painting can apply in this institute irrespective of education qualification.

Sherab has learnt painting with the stone colours however, these days most of the painting is done with the chemical colours. Right now Sherab is working in a monastery, painting its walls with the Thangka paintings. It's a group work and each one in the group gets Rs8000/month. Such a work which involves painting of the monastery takes at least two years and getting one such assignment means getting a steady income for a long period. He works in the monastery everyday from 8am to 5pm. Rest of the members in his family are involved in farming, and wholesale business.

"I enjoy my work. It is something I always liked. It earns me good money and since it's a religious work it has prestige as well. Even if I do not paint a monastery by simply making a Thangka painting without gold I can easily sell one Thanks for no less than Rs 4000/-. But these days there competition from the cheap duplicate Thanks that come from Nepal. They use bad colours and are not really Thankas. But here they get sold since most of the people do not understand what a Thanks painting actually is. Earning a living through painting traditional Tibetan stuff is far easier than through contemporary or modern art. Thangka paintings have a great demand. The

¹⁷ Abstract from the focus group discussion with the Youth in Nyoma ...these were the opinions expressed by nine other participants.

western tourists do not mind spending thousands of rupees on buying an 'original' Thangka painting."

Shreab however could not explain what he meant by an 'original Thangka painting'. *"Art goes beyond boundaries. I do not need to be a Tibetan to practice Tibetan art. Art is something anyone can learn and do. I do not need a permit to practice art. That is the beauty of it. Anything to do with tradition, history, and culture attracts people. They are curious to know. They want to spend money on the antics. These days it is difficult to cross the border, but till last year at least the older Tibetans were easily allowed inside Tibet. My own uncle would go to Tibet and bring in the old daggers, singing bowls, head gears from Tibet. Chinese find the young people like us dangerous so it's difficult for us to go there. But these older men seem harmless to them. So they go. But now due to the Olympics borders have been sealed. Painting a Thangka relaxes me. I feel completely engrossed into it and then it doesn't matter whether I am a refugee or a citizen. I do my work sincerely and enjoy it, and that is what matters to me."*

Sherab simply seemed content with his work and his status. Not being a citizen of India or being a refugee did not affect him directly, at least that is what he thought. He was not rebellious, he was not fighting for a cause and neither was he justifying or associating his choice of livelihood to any higher cause. This was probably because his work was seen as a 'good work', 'work of the god', and something that was preserving a 'dying Tibetan art'. His work was nowhere in conflict with popular Tibetan beliefs of 'moral and immoral', 'patriotic' or non patriotic'.

Besides taking individual interview I conducted a focus group discussion with the ones interviewed and few other third generation Tibetan refugees from Nyoma settlement and asked them to do a simple SWOT analysis to find what they consider as their strengths, weakness, opportunities and

threats, given the fact that they are refugees. Following are the arguments that came forth through the focus group discussion.

Tibet is perceived by the second generation is Tibet is an independent country. It has its own national flag, national anthem, national dress, and national language. It's a democratic country and has a democratically elected government - 'We never had to fight for democracy, we have been given democracy'

They insist that even though they were born in India they are Tibetans because their parents are Tibetans and in the schools they grow up learning Tibetan culture, Tibetan history and language. They are Tibetan because they are told they are Tibetans and this they say is the case with every other person who claims to be of a particular nationality. Being Tibetan means being compassionate, non violent, peace loving people. Tibetans do not fight and Tibetans deserve support because they have been cheated by the Chinese is the dominant opinion. As Tibetan refugees they differentiate themselves from others. They feel their identity as Tibetan gives them power.

They feel they are not 'beggars' but feel it's their right to get support' and aid since they have been 'thrown out' of their country. Had Chinese not occupied their country they would have not left their country since they feel Tibet had everything. They do not have many Ladakhi friends since they never live in the village settlement as they study in the SOS schools. So there is no way they can be friends with the local Ladakhi. That is why Ladkahis do not know what they have to suffer as refugees. They also feel that despite being as good as the Ladakhi youth they do not have opportunities that the Ladakhis have.

This perception however is in contradiction to their own statements where they claim that they have all the opportunities. They pointed out that they

can get jobs in the private sector, that they get far better education in the TCV schools and feel that despite of they being refugees, Ladakhis prefer sending their children to 'our' Tibetan schools. During the focus group discussion they mentioned that they can also apply for the government jobs, however they have no reservation, unlike the Ladakhis. They can get admission in any of the private and government colleges and universities. Their own government in exile provides them with scholarships for higher education in India and abroad. On the issue of taking on Indian citizenship they felt Indian citizenship would provide them with better opportunities. As refugees they said they could not own a 'Cyber cafe', or a 'Travel and tour agency'. They could get all India driving licence. They consider Dalia Lama and the Tibetan government in exile as their biggest support and strongly feel that after the demise of Dalai lama it would be very difficult for the Tibetans to sustain themselves. Thus they feel it becomes all the more important to free Tibet. They feel right nothing else but getting freedom was the most important goal.

The Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) schools, run and managed by the Tibetan Government in Exile, are considered to be one of the better run schools in the whole of Ladakh. The standard of state education in the region has been questioned and state of education in the municipal schools run by the Indian government or the state government have failed to provide sound education in this remote region. The Ladakhis prefer sending their children to the TCV school whenever there are extra seats available. The private schools which are now opening up in the region in response to the state sponsored education, prefer teachers passed out from the TCV schools then the ones who have done their schooling from the government school. The infrastructure available to the SOS schools is far superior than what the government schools in Ladakh or in any other Indian states get) Give reference. Thus the Tibetan community has evolved its own unique education policy and system which is known to be giving quality education to their children and are also instrumental in preserving and kindling the

Tibetan culture, ethos and nationalism amongst the third generation Tibetan refugee growing up in an alien state. (Nowak and Margaret M. 1978)

Below 18 years of age there is no need for the transfer certificate, so the children can study in other settlements in India. *It should be noted that not all Tibetans living in India do in fact have refugee status, since many of the second and third generation exiles have not been granted it. Tibetans commonly refer to themselves as both, 'refugees' (Skyabs bcol ba) and 'exile' (Yulgyar ba), literally meaning a person who has changed places, as opposed to being in ones' own land. In demonstrations the term 'refuge' is more often employed. Technically not all the Tibetan refugee population in India benefit from the refugee status since India is not a signatory of the UN refugee convention. First generation Tibetan refugees and their Indian born children have been granted 'refugee like status' and given 'RC' (Refugee certificate) as proof of identity. However more recently arrived Tibetans are allowed into India but not given legal residence in India. "Regardless of the absence of a clear legal denomination though, one must choose to employ the terms used by Tibetans themselves, in which case 'exile' and refugee are applicable."* (Prost 2006).

The young Tibetans do take pride in their spiritual leader, Dalai Lama, but at the same time they are creating new identities. The Tibetan youth congress openly expresses its political views demanding total autonomy, which is directly in opposition to that of Dalai Lamas. The changing notions of affluence, security, modernity and nationality are creating aspirations far different from what the first generation of refugees had. These new aspirations and ambitions of the second generation of Tibetan refugees has created different sets of vulnerabilities for them, that directly influence their livelihood choices and strategies to achieve the same. Thus while survival was the sole aim of the first generation of Tibetans who

came in India it is no longer the case with the second and the third generation of Tibetan refugees born or brought up in India.¹⁸

The second generation has been exposed to the larger world, they are aware of their rights, they are educated, they can speak the local Ladakhi language as well as English and Hindi, they know that besides China there are other countries that do not support their cause and besides India there are other nations that have sympathy towards their cause. It gives them a sense of security that the USA is on their side. All these perceptions build high hopes amongst them. They exhibit confidence, they question, and they are no more content with the status of being takers. They strive for equality and compete with the locals.

¹⁸ Tenzing Norsang, joint secretary, Tibetan youth congress, central executive

Chapter: 6

Conclusion

The analysis of the life stories of the first and the second generation Tibetan refugees from the Changtang shows varied layers of identities through which they churn out their own logic for support. While the first generation relates more with the religion, culture and livelihood based identity the second generation refugees relates with the nationality based identity.

For the first generation the logic of support is their vulnerability. They thus position themselves as vulnerable, Buddhist, poor people of Dalai Lama, whose survival is at stake. They do not differentiate on the basis of nationality but on the basis of the culture. The interpretation of life stories shows a common thread of causes that have affected the livelihoods of the interviewees and that is essentially being away from Tibet. While for the first generation leaving Tibet led to deprivation of far better resources in Tibet and compromising with the inferior poor natural resources in India, for the second generation being away from Tibet means less growth opportunities.

While second generation seems more assertive about their claims and have strong notions of their rights, the first generation seemed more modest about their claims. The second generation takes pride in being refugees. The first generation related their state of being refugees to deprivation and unhappiness. The first generation identity is essentially based on their personal experiences, and comes through in the life story that they tell as reconstructed past. The second generation's sense of identity is more of created identity as part of the larger nation building agenda of the Tibetan government in exile. While the first generation's life story speaks more of

their experienced reality the second generation speaks in terms of symbolic identity that comes from the years of conditioning within the Tibetan SOS schools. There emerge, within the life stories, strong notions of who is good and who is bad, which country supports them and which does not, what they got and what they did not and these notions differ between the generations. While the first generation strictly follows the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism while earning their livelihood, the second generation has conveniently divorced the religion from their personal ambitions and livelihoods.

There is a categorical shift in the symbols of collective identification and while the first generation survived by seeing the similarities between the host population and themselves, the second generation compares and strives on differentiation. The first generation tends to speak positively about the host population and express gratefulness. They consider it the right of the host population as primary and theirs as secondary. It seems natural for them to be the takers and them the givers. However the second generation questions this difference. They compare themselves with the Ladakhis and feel that had they been in their own country they wouldn't have faced such discrimination and thus feel it important to attain freedom.

The study shows that interpretation of one's life story is imperative to create a material and non material assets of livelihoods as refugees. These interpretations position Tibetan refugees as those in a need of protection and assistance. It further creates subtle differentiation that maintains their unique socio – cultural identity, positioning them as different from the local host community. Thus interpretation of the life story creates the notions of inclusion and differentiation as symbolic identity. The interpretative strategy adopted by the first and the second generations of Tibetan refugees to position themselves as a community creates specific entitlements accordingly. The strategy becomes crucial to know for themselves what they are deserving of and even if the claims and rights are not asserted discretely the TRs have created their own notion of what they deserved and

what they did not get in spite and despite of being deserving of it. The interpretation of their life stories helps them know what they have compromised and what they get back in return of that compromise. It helps them know how far they can go in claiming what they think they deserve and how far they can compromise with what they are not getting.

Creating differentiation becomes equally important to separate the Tibetan reality from the reality of the local Ladakhi people. In Ladakh where the local population shares the same ethnic and cultural lineage as the Tibetans, it becomes imperative to create marked differentiation regarding what is essentially Tibetan. Ladakh as a region is a remote, underdeveloped region of India. The local population here is vulnerable to the vagaries of nature and leads a subsistence economy, equally deserving of development fund. What makes the position of Tibetans stronger is their status of being refugee which positions them as more vulnerable than the local population.

It is only after fixing ones Identity that one can contest for ones rights and claims. It's on the basis of associations that individuals create, that further lead to asset creation. It's how the individuals position themselves that decides what rights they would get. This positioning of the refugees viz. a viz. the citizens becomes yet another livelihoods strategy. "Gaining sympathy", "dependency syndrome", "portraying vulnerability" creates an identity that qualifies assistance and works as a strategy in the initial stages of crises. In survival economy as it could be called, livelihoods thrive on the creation of identity out of weakness, where rights do not have any place. Assertiveness does not work. Once the survival does not remain the primary issue livelihoods becomes a right that should be claimed. Thus the livelihoods strategies change with the changing identities, more so positioning ones identity over the time itself becomes a livelihoods strategy.

The city of Leh is popularly known as 'Little Tibet' in India, Dalai Lama and Karmappa's photographs are seen hanging in every vehicle; Dalai

Lama's summer palace is a major tourist attraction in Leh. Every year on the 7th Of July, Dalai Lama's birthday is celebrated as a national festival where in all the Tibetans gather around the Dalai Lama's palace and have a 'Picnic'. Holding picnics in the woods was one of the popular cultures amongst the elites from central provenience of Tibet, Lhasa. However this was the practice of the elites which now has become popular culture amongst the Tibetan refugees. (Dunham 2004)

It has been over 30 years since the Tibetan Refugees have been living in India as political refugees. The Tibetan Diaspora in India, even when seen through a layperson's point of view departs from the notions of vulnerabilities associated with the refugees. The literature shows the Tibetan refugees across the world as a most visible community of refugees, a community that has managed to harness considerable sympathy and sponsorship, not just from the UN bodies but from the people at large. Anything that is Tibetan deserves attention and sympathy; it's a non violent people's movement for justice and issue that has gone beyond the debate of whether it is just or unjust. While there is considerable investment in the cause of Tibet, it goes beyond saying that Tibetans have adopted the strategy of 'identity construct', in a most subtle way to gain protection.

'Tibetan' today is a brand by itself and everything with a prefix 'Tibetan' attracts considerable attention and sympathy amongst the tourist population that visit Ladakh. While one would see number of Tibetan restaurants in the main Leh city, finding a restaurant serving the local Ladakhi food is rare to be found. Images of places from Tibet, such as Potala, are a favourite motif in cultural artefacts

Through the narratives it can be concluded that the interpretation of one's life story leads to justification of for what claims and demands. Narrative identity justifies ones livelihoods strategies and also goes into building the livelihood asset by establishing oneself as worthy of trust, support, and

protection and a rightful share in the resources, in a given system or circumstances. As refugees where there is considerable dependency on external aid and support, narrative identity build through life stories generates sympathy that draws aid and support, creating symbolic base of assets.

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