

DRESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY- A CASE STUDY OF THE TRADITIONAL DRESS OF THE TIBETANS IN EXILE IN INDIA

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Abstract

The last century has seen mass displacement of people across geographic boundaries, owing to military, political and social turmoil. The displaced population takes with them their culture, cuisine and clothing, which they struggle to preserve and protect, especially in a foreign culture which is far removed from their home culture. This struggle is amplified in a world of globalisation and westernisation.

The 1950s saw an exodus of Tibetans fleeing their country and following His Holiness Dalai Lama to India, in pursuit of a peaceful life. This migration continues even today, making India either a final destination. or a transit while moving to the United States, for Tibetans. Today, about 120,000 Tibetan refugees remain in India, spread across 35 settlements.

Art, dress and visual culture is a window to any culture—its people, traditions, habits, and so on, and it can be a strong and effective instrument passed down the generations for continuity of a minority migrant culture in any given time and region. Tibetan attire and accessories carry great significance to the culture and speak volumes about their history, personal beliefs and the personality of the individuals wearing them. While influenced by neighbouring cultures from China, India and Nepal, the Himalayan region's remoteness and inaccessibility have preserved distinct local influences and stimulated the development of its distinct culture.

Within Tibet, Tibetans are losing their culture due to Chinese suppression. On the other hand, the Tibetan diaspora in India faces a threat of disintegration as many of the new generation exiles have started moving out from the existing Tibetan settlements and their urge to move to the west makes the situation worse. Moreover, Tibetans already settled in the west are in danger of assimilating into the western culture and lifestyle. Therefore, Tibetans fear that Tibetan identity will be wiped out completely and believe the only hope of keeping the culture alive is by those in exile in India. Hence, there is an urgency to uphold their traditional culture through their dress, art, architecture, food and religion.

This research paper focuses on the study of the traditional dress of the Tibetans in exile in India and looks at it as a tool for preservation of their cultural and national identity. This research is empirical, qualitative and interdisciplinary as it encompasses, in addition to dress, social and cultural values.

Introduction

The last century has seen mass displacement of people across geographic boundaries, owing to military, political and social turmoil. The displaced population takes with them their culture, cuisine and clothing, which they struggle to preserve and protect, especially in a foreign environment which is far removed from their home culture. This struggle is amplified in a world of globalisation and westernisation.

The 1950s saw an exodus of Tibetans fleeing their country and following His Holiness the Dalai Lama to India, in pursuit of a peaceful life. India's Prime Minister at the time, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru showed personal interest in the situation of these Tibetans since the first wave that came to India in 1959. The cultural and religious ties between India and Tibet helped foster an atmosphere of welcome and sympathy. With the support of the Indian Government, the Dalai Lama set up the Tibetan government in exile in McLeod Ganj in North India, although Tibet was not officially recognised as a country. The conscious adoption and identification of being in exile is political in nature, signifying a notion of return to the homeland and calls for Tibet's Independence (Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), 2021). Other institutions such as Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts and Tibetan Children's Village boarding schools were set up to preserve Tibetan culture.

This Tibetan migration commenced over 50 years ago and it continues even today, making India either a final destination, or a transit while moving to the USA or Canada, for Tibetans. Today, about 120,000 Tibetan refugees remain in India, spread across 35 settlements (CTA, 2021). Tibetans in India enjoy the freedom to express their culture, religion and activism. Preservation of their culture, as a reminder of their homeland, is a priority leading to initiatives like *Lhakar* and *Gorshey Nights* and the Miss Tibet pageant.

Within scholarly and popular discourse, Tibetan identity, both national and cultural, has been studied in the context of political activism, human rights and justice. However, scholarly attention towards the study of their traditional dress and its significance in construction of their identity and struggle is found lacking.

Drawing on the oral histories and narratives of the Tibetans in exile in India, and identity theories, the aim of this paper is to investigate the role of traditional dress in shaping and holding the Tibetan identity in exile. This paper largely draws upon interviews conducted in two distinct living environments for Tibetans in India: McLeod Ganj and Darjeeling. McLeod Ganj in North India is the seat of the Tibetan Parliament as well as the home of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, making it an important Buddhist pilgrimage and attracting Buddhists and other tourists from all over the globe. Darjeeling is a hill town in North East India, with a multicultural population of Tibetans, Nepalis, Lepchas and Indian Bengalis. Studying these two settlements will facilitate a better understanding of the perspectives of locals and the notions of identity associated with it. This research is empirical, qualitative and interdisciplinary as it addresses, social and cultural values in addition to the dress

History and Background

Tibetans in Exile in India

The migration of the 150,000 population from Tibet to India during the first wave in 1959 was followed by the second wave in the 1980s. Even today, 3000-4500 Tibetans arrive in India every year in pursuit of cultural education and a peaceful life. All are given refuge in the little Himalayan town of McLeod Ganj, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile and home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (Suri, Cumulus). The migration and uprooting may have contributed to disruption of identities, low self-esteem and resistance to assimilation.

Upon their arrival in India, the major priorities of His Holiness the Dalai Lama were the rehabilitation of Tibetan refugees, the education of Tibetan children, and the preservation of Tibetan culture and identity. To realise these objectives, all Tibetan refugees were settled into a cohesive homogenous society and separate schools were set up for their children with their own curriculum. The schools serve as a site of construction of Tibetan ethnic identity for younger Tibetans born outside of the homeland. The Department of Religion and Culture was set up under the Central Tibetan Administration to preserve and promote Tibet's spiritual and cultural heritage (Paljor, 2019). The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts was set up with the mission to preserve the culture of Tibet as it existed prior to the Chinese takeover (Chopel, 2022).

These people upon their arrival struggled to adapt to the dominant Indian culture, due to the vast cultural difference in religion, rituals, language, clothing and food habits. Their willingness to assimilate was low as they were introduced to India as asylum seekers rather than free-willed migrants, leading to negative inter-cultural sensitivity and culture shock. This led to emotional expression and responses of anger, negativity, anxiety and frustration (Chopel, 2022).

However, the second and third generation migrants engage more freely in the process of acculturation in order to reduce social friction. They develop better socio-cultural skills, move out of their settlement to study and work in various parts of India and make an effort to blend in with the host society (Lama, 2019). But this is difficult as they are culturally and visually distinguishable from those culturally native to India. They are also afraid of losing aspects or all of their heritage due to immigrant assimilation.

Current Situation of the Tibetans-in-exile in India

Today, there are about 120,000 Tibetan refugees spread over 35 settlements across India (Central Tibetan Administration, 2021). As well, there are Tibetans located in scattered communities in various towns and cities of India.

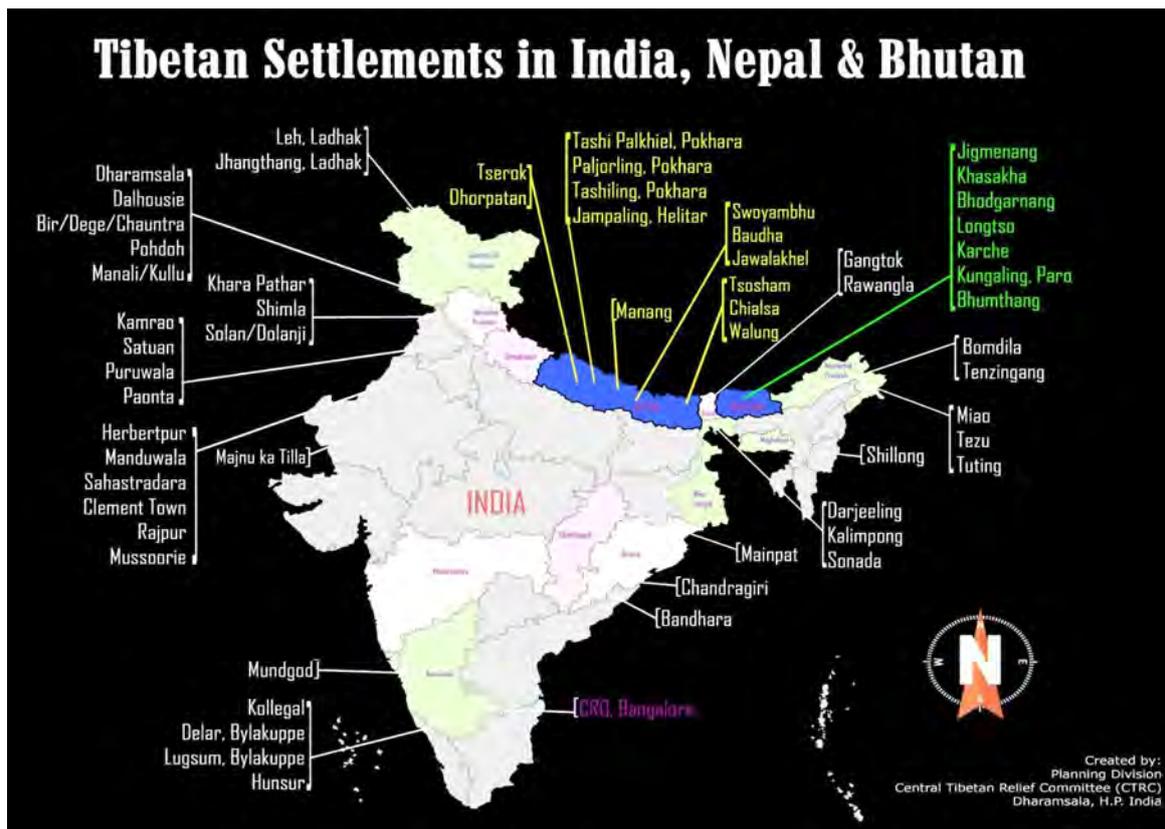


Figure 1. Map of India showing the Tibetan settlements across the country.

Credit: <https://centraltibetanreliefcommittee.net/settlements/>

Tibetan youth who move out of the settlements to other Indian towns make an effort to reduce social friction with the host country. They learn to speak Hindi (the local language), eat Indian food, wear Indian and western clothes and some even marry outside the Tibetan community. The older generation often expresses anxiety over this dilution of Tibetan culture especially amongst the younger generation. The youth have to cope with being confronted with an overwhelming narrative of culture loss.

Tibetan culture is being determinably preserved and promoted by the exile community. According to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibetans must maintain their traditions and religious practices in order for the culture to survive. Tibetans living in the settlements gather to celebrate all their festivals like *Losar* (Tibetan New Year) and His Holiness The Dalai Lama's birthday. These events bind the community together by providing opportunities to wear traditional dress and participate in traditional song and dance.

Tibetan narratives in India frequently feature a strong and often romanticised collective memory and idea of return to a homeland that is no longer accessible, consciousness of a shared culture and ethnic background, active preservation of culture, and political and social alienation from the society of the host country (Anand, 2000).

Identity and Culture

Byers (2014) discusses Jaan Valsiner's framework on the relationship between the individual and culture where personal culture refers to "the private or public construction of meanings by

an individual person”, while collective culture refers to “the domain of cultural processes that occur between people, including any public expression of a personal culture.”

Byers (2014) further says that culture consists of the “convergence and divergence of perspectives, meanings and ideas that characterise the individual, the social world, and the relation between them.”

This helps us get a perspective on the Tibetan struggle for cultural as well as individual identity which is complicated and continues to become more complicated as they are the second and third generations born in exile. In this context, it is important to understand that although expressing their Tibetan identity in light of the threat to its very existence is crucial for Tibetans, each individual has their own way of internalising this culture and integrating it into their own identity.

According to Jeffery Week, the strongest sense of community is usually seen “in groups who find their collective existence threatened and who construct out of this a community of identity which provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment” (Bauman and Benedetto, 2004). In this light, a common belief of the threat of losing their culture due to assimilation into the Western culture and the lack of freedoms to practise the Tibetan Buddhist culture back in the homeland has permeated the Tibetan community in exile.

Preservation of Culture

While influences of neighbouring cultures such as China, India and Nepal are unavoidable, Tibet's remoteness and inaccessibility may have managed to preserve the distinct local influences and stimulated the development of its distinct culture. This has led to maintenance of the rich Tibetan cultural heritage of the country, largely unblemished. Religion has played a central role in maintaining this traditional culture and society, even in exile.

Tibetans living in India take a collective responsibility to preserve Tibetan Buddhism, language, culture, history and tradition. Falcone and Wangchuk (2008) note that the majority of first and second generation Tibetans living in exile reject any creolization of Tibetan identity with influences from the host country, in an effort to keep the cultural traditions alive and hence, keep the Tibetan identity alive. Tibetan schools and monasteries further aid in the process of identity maintenance by upholding cultural traditions.

The second and third generation in exile acquire knowledge of the original homeland only through oral tales from their elders. Some of them are beginning to accept that they would never be able to return to Tibet or it would be like starting everything from scratch, especially when they are unsure of having any family left in Tibet. So it has become imperative to take measures for inculcating a sense of belonging and identity amongst the Tibetan youth in India.

On the other hand, the communist Chinese government, in their cultural exchange programs, lay claim to representing Tibetan culture as one of China's ethnic minorities, often misrepresenting the dress styles. This raises concern for the Tibetans-in-exile towards authentic presentation of Tibet's culture, as a unique expression of a distinctive people. The views of the Tibetans in exile and the Chinese position are polarised given the current state of relations between them.

The Tibetan government-in-exile states its prime objective is to protect and accurately present Tibetan culture (Central Tibetan Administration, 2021). Religious festivals and national celebrations, such as *Losar* and His Holiness The Dalai Lama's birthday are celebrated. The recent years have seen more events being organised to strengthen a sense of collective Tibetan identity and connect the youth to their cultural heritage. The *Lhakar* movement and *Gorshey* Nights are two such platforms.

Cultural Movements

'Lhakar'

Lhakar or 'White Wednesday' is the Tibetan cultural resurgence movement. It is a grassroots movement that first started in Tibet in 2008, and has now spread globally. Every Wednesday, Tibetans in Tibet and Tibetans in exile engage in individually defined acts of assertion of Tibetan identity. This day of the week bears great spiritual significance to Tibetans because it is His Holiness The Dalai Lama's holy day. Gyurmela (2022) says that this movement serves as a constant reminder of one's Tibetan identity and compels one to act Tibetan on Wednesdays through dressing Tibetan, eating Tibetan, supporting Tibetan businesses and more.

Most importantly it offers the Tibetan communities around the world a solution to an issue they have been dealing with for a long time; the increasing generational gap between the Tibetan youths and the language, culture and religion of their homeland. *Lhakar* has become an intergenerational activity, bridging the gap between the older generations and Tibetan youth who actively practise *Lhakar* by dressing in traditional Tibetan clothing, speaking Tibetan language and spreading awareness about Tibet (Pasricha, 2014).

A non-violent and subtle means of political resistance, *Lhakar* incorporates activism into everyday life where daily mundane routine is portrayed as symbolic assertions of Tibetan identity. Under tense political situations, *Lhakar* has emerged as a paradigm shift in the way Tibetans' view activism (Pasricha, 2014). In creating social change, clothing has been central to the articulation of *Lhakar's* beliefs and the clothed body a space of assertion of the Tibetan identity.

'Gorshey' Nights

Gorshey is a traditional Tibetan dance form where people dance in circles to Tibetan music. *Gorshey* nights is a recent effort by the Tibetan diaspora across the globe where communal gatherings are organised for people to participate in their traditional dance as a celebration of their rich culture amidst threats to its existence (Abraham, 2022). Tibetan food is served.

Within the larger movement for Tibet, *Gorshey* nights seek to create a unified national consciousness that is nonetheless made visible in dress and dance. The aspiration to participate in *Gorshey* has led to a renewed appreciation and demand for traditional dress among the younger generation (Gyurmela, 2022). In the settlement of Darjeeling, this means more business for the traditional dressmakers. This further creates a renewed sense of belonging and pride in their heritage. New developments, such as this, demonstrate a commitment to Tibetan cultural survival, not just by the older generation but also by the youngsters.

Miss Tibet Pageant

The Miss Tibet pageant has been organised annually in McLeod Ganj since 2002. The pageant is embedded in a larger social context. It is presented by some as a medium for promoting the Tibetan national struggle on the global stage through highlighting Tibet's traditional culture alongside the adaptability of Tibetans to globalised modernism (Chopel, 2022).

The older generation of Tibetans view the pageant as a gateway to accept western ideas of beauty, which they find opposed to traditional Tibetan views. The younger generation views the pageant as inspiration to safeguard their identity, culture and sense of belonging in an artistic and modern way.

The title 'Miss Tibet' communicates a feeling of unity, a culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation lost to China but alive in the minds of Tibetans and establishes its identity as distinct from China. Here, traditional Tibetan dress and ornaments play a vital role in image creation. However, there has been interference and opposition from the Chinese government to change the name to 'Miss Tibet-China', which the organisers and participants have refused.

Discussion

Dress as an Expression of Cultural Identity

McCracken (1988) states that dress within a society provides a fixed set of messages and serves as a mode of non-verbal communication signalling our personal worth, identity, values, and beliefs. Hence, dress plays a vital role in shaping individual and cultural identity.

The language of personal dress can express social roles, social differentiation, and economic status, political and religious affiliations (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). Dress is a universal feature of human behaviour whose examination contributes to our knowledge about the fabric of culture and our understanding of human nature.

The 'Meaning and Identity Model', developed by Roach-Higgins and Eicher, focuses on how dress functions as a medium of effective communication, signalling meaning and identity. People acquire their identity by way of interaction in social, physical and biological settings. This approach advanced beyond communication via discourse to include communication through appearance, with dress having a certain priority over discourse in establishing identity.

Arthur (1999), in her review of ethnographic fieldwork, argues that traditional and folk dress of specific cultural groups defines social boundaries by separating group members from outsiders, while bonding members to each other. It is a social and cultural product, which is located within a specific time and place directly related to beliefs, knowledge and values. This theory substantiates the role of traditional Tibetan dress worn during *Lhakhar* and *Gorshey* Nights, as a social and cultural product, in creating a sense of belonging and solidarity among those in exile and being instrumental in identity creation. Dress also becomes a symbol of political protest by the Tibetan diaspora to assert their distinctive cultural and national identity, as separate from other Asian nationalities.

Dress has always been an important marker of ethnic and cultural identities. Many of my participants discussed how they could easily engage non-Tibetans in conversations, especially those studying / working outside the settlements in India, every time they wear traditional clothes. Dress is a window into a culture because it “visually attests to salient ideas, concepts and categories fundamental to culture” (Arthur, 1999). They also feel wearing traditional dress helps them connect spiritually with their homeland.

Cultural continuity is being constantly reasserted and redefined, especially among diaspora communities, in which dress is central to cultural meaning as offering the potential to create a sense of identity more than any other art form. Dress also serves as the memory of a culture, a record and a guide to cultural knowledge. In this capacity, dress is both a valuable and powerful means of communication within and outside the community.

Clothing in particular provides useful grounds for resistance as it is a taken for granted aspect of everyday life. In China where collective expressions of dissent are suppressed by the government through military means, wearing Tibetan dress proves to be a more sustainable and non-violent way of engaging in the Tibetan freedom struggle (Yangzom, 2014). The collective participatory act of wearing Tibetan dress creates a visual signifier where dress becomes a symbolic boundary between the Tibetans and the Chinese government.

Dress Styles of the Tibetans

Traditional Tibetan dress varies according to region, season, rank, and position. Elaborate dress including ornaments and headgear are worn for ceremonial occasions like festivals and weddings. Unlike today's world of fashion, Tibetan attire and accessories carry great significance to the culture and speaks volumes about their history, personal beliefs and the personality of the individuals wearing them (Zingkha, 2019). Tibetans are usually conservative in their clothes. They wear long-standing and unique Tibetan clothing together with vibrant coral, amber and other precious jewellery plus luxurious and beautiful gold and silver ornaments. Buddhism underlines every aspect of life for Tibetans and influences the colours and motifs on their dress.

The women wear *chuba* or long robes without sleeves, *wongchu* or a silk/ cotton blouse underneath with woollen/ cotton pants and a wide belt around the waist. Married women wear colourful striped aprons called *pangden* and slivers of white conch shells adorned with precious coral, silver and other forms of decoration in their hair. Men usually wear waist-level short shirts made of cotton or brocade laced with silk, and a long gown with round neck and wide sleeves. The waistline, crotch and trouser legs are all very wide.



Figure 2. Tibetans in Darjeeling dress in traditional dress for family gatherings.
Credit: Personal albums of Tenzin Zingkha.

Tibetan Buddhism has four separate traditions, each with their own style and colours of the *chogo* or robes that signify a monk's level of practice and rank. Monk clothing is simple and solemn. It is categorised into *duiga* (waistcoat), *xiamute* (monk skirt) and *kasaya* (patch-worked wrap).



Figure 3. Monks at the Namgyal Monastery, McLeod Ganj.

As Chopel (2022) says, “the clothing and accessories worn by the Tibetans speaks volumes about their love for expressing their culture and history through their clothing.”

Conclusion

The pursuit of preservation of cultural identity and a search for personal identity is a sentiment frequently echoed by the Tibetans in exile in India. The ritual of collectively dressing in traditional gear imparts a sense of solidarity and a sense of collective as well as individual identity to a displaced community who have lost their homeland and are in danger of losing all

or aspects of their culture. Hence, cultural survival is an urgent need among the Tibetan exile community in India who are guardians to a culture that is faced with extinction.

Dress is a semiotic, which can signal status, identity, gender, ethnicity, values, and beliefs. It is a way of expressing cultural identity and asserting personal identity, which allows Tibetans to celebrate their cultural heritage even in exile. Traditional dress is essential in the cultural continuity of the Tibetan people as it is a tool for the investigation of ethnicity and culture. Here, clothing is not limited to just a physical boundary that shields the natural elements but “becomes a symbolic practice in identity formation” (Anand, 2000).

In the Tibetan diaspora, culture plays an important role in the political struggle since the beginning of the history of the exile community. The Tibetan identity, language, and religion have been threatened by the communist Chinese regime in Tibet and under the influence of western culture in the diaspora. In response to this threat, the Tibetans in India have vigilantly worked to maintain their rich culture and tradition in exile, especially through events like *Lhakar* Wednesday and *Gorshey* nights which provide an opportunity for members of a minority to become a majority when they congregate together in one place, dressed in a similar style. Such events strengthen a sense of collective Tibetan identity and provide an opportunity to use the body and its adornments as a silent mode of activism.

Visual culture is the window to any indigenous or folk culture. Dress is not just limited to being a body covering but fulfils a larger role of being a marker for identity within and beyond an individual, a mode for political struggle and a tool for preservation of a culture and its heritage.

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