Chapter 4

Fieldwork Reflections: A Report on Observations and Findings

In qualitative studies, the researchers are the central instruments in all stages of the research process, ranging from framing the interview questions to deciding the nature and tool of analysis. Thus, they drive the shaping of both the process and the outcomes of their studies (Horsburg, 2003). However, such a power position also induces a sense of responsibility in the researcher's conscious awareness of maintaining their ethical and researcher's decorum throughout the research process. Researchers often become deeply rooted within the research context and are committed to capturing and authentically representing participants' voices and levied experiences by bracketing the cognitive biases that may contaminate the reliability of the study to the best of their knowledge. However, as argued by Holloway and Biley (2011), researchers are not '*tabula rasa*' either, i.e. blank slates devoid of preconceived notions and academic assumptions. They, too, carry their own experiences and cultural perspectives and either consciously or unconsciously bring them into their study, making the self an intrinsic part of the research. However, writing the self into the research is only the beginning, not its end or purpose.

Thus, the present work, including the data collection and representation, moves away from the detachment style advocated in positivist and post-positivist paradigms. The study realises that researchers are far from being distant observers maintaining a neutral position but enter the field as another human, bringing their own historical pasts, social and cultural beliefs, and biases, which inevitably interact with the participants and the environment they study. This dynamic and interactionist environment means that in qualitative studies, the researchers do not merely observe reality but co-construct it through their presence and interaction. Researchers influence

and are influenced in many places, creating a mutual relationship that, to some extent, determines the meanings and narratives emerging from the study. In other words, the researcher's positionality in qualitative research, including their social, cultural and self contexts, becomes an integral part of the research process, influencing what is observed, how it is perceived and interpreted, and how it is eventually represented in their writings. In such a view, this chapter acknowledges and discusses the researcher's active and subjective role during the fieldwork.

Since a significant portion of the meaning-making in qualitative research depends on the researcher's positionality thus, their immersion requires a continuing critical stance toward their role in the research process (Shaw, 2010). In the present work, the researcher actively reflected on how his presence, preconceived notions, academic training, hypothetical assumption and decisions at every step facilitated or hindered the scientific endeavour. For instance, during the fieldwork, the researcher remained conscious about the approach to questioning the participants and the language he used and even reflected significantly on how the non-verbal cues can affect the participants' responses. Such exercised reflexivity helped bring transparency into the research process and allowed the researcher to account for how his position impacted the research progress and findings. Moreover, this process of reflexivity extends beyond methodological considerations to ethical dimensions. For instance, the researcher also addressed himself with questions of power and representation and was mindful that he should portray participants and their narratives. Such steps ensured that the researcher's interpretations did not overshadow or manipulate the voices he sought to amplify. In recognising their influencing role, qualitative researchers contribute to a richer and more detailed understanding of human experiences. However, this engagement also comes with the responsibility to balance empathy and critical distance, to remain engaged yet analytically rigorous (Maier & Monahan, 2009). By

continually questioning his positionality and its influence, the researcher in the present thesis intends to create and maintain an ethical and reflective research practice that honours the complexity of the social group he studied.

Fieldworks are often described in academics as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and live reality, but the actual experience is more complex and multifaceted (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1990). In this work as well, the researcher's fieldwork experience was no different - it was a deeply immersive, challenging, and transformative journey that left an indelible mark on both my research and my understanding of the human condition. Here, the term 'fieldwork' signifies that the data collection process requires the researcher to visit the field multiple times to make connections, get permission, build rapport, record interviews and re-approach the participants for further queries. The present work comprises fieldwork conducted in three phases, at three different times, covering three distinct regions of India, i.e. Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh, Mysore district of Karnataka and Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh.

Phase I: The Padoh Settlement (Mandi, Himachal Pradesh)

The Pandoh settlement, a small Tibetan refugee community tucked away in the remote mountains, revealed itself slowly as I made my way there. The journey alone was symbolic of the effort required to connect with a world far removed from the conveniences of urban life. The houses, seemingly hanging from the mountainside, were modest and yet modern enough, yet they stood as testaments to the resilience and ingenuity of their inhabitants. Despite the evident lack of resources and basic facilities, the settlement carried an air of quiet strength and unity that I found deeply humbling.

I visited the Pandoh settlement during the early days of 2019. It was my first time entering the field. Even though I had prior experience taking interviews during my Masters and rehearsed interview schedules with my supervisor and research mates, entering the community as a lone researcher was an intimidating prospect. However, the gatekeeper- a local resident introduced to me through my supervisor- proved invaluable. His familiarity with the settlement and personal ties to the residents allowed me to navigate the initial barriers of trust and hesitation. He introduced me to one of the participants who was pursuing a Master of Arts from a University in Delhi. The thought was to first approach someone who attends college and can understand the purpose of my field visit. Thus, she became my first participant and accompanied me in interviewing other participants, explaining my purpose of visiting in their local language where I felt stuck. Also, conducting interviews in this setting brought its own set of challenges and rewards. Most of the participants were more comfortable speaking Hindi, which meant that I had to step out of my academic comfort zone and engage in a language I hadn't anticipated relying on so heavily. This shift taught me an important lesson: language is not just a medium of communication but a bridge to connection. Speaking in Hindi allowed me to align more closely with the rhythms of their everyday lives. It wasn't just about understanding their words—it was about understanding their worlds.

Some moments left a lasting impression on me. One afternoon, as I sat in a small kitchen warmed by a wood-fired stove, an older woman recalled her tragic escape from Tibet. At one point, she opened a small box and showed me a worn piece of cloth embroidered with Tibetan symbols, a keepsake from her homeland. She held it with such great respect that she explicitly communicated its profound significance in her life without words. "*This is my only connection to home*," she said softly. Her words were not just a part of my data- they were a window into the

emotional weight of displacement and memory. Beyond the interviews, my time in Pandoh was filled with reflective moments. Walking through the narrow pathways of the settlement, surrounded by the hardships of the mountain ranges, I was struck by the layers of resilience embedded in the community's daily life. Children played outside homes that seemed precariously perched on the edge of cliffs, their laughter contrasting with the evident hardships of their environment. The residents' ability to find joy and strength amidst such challenges was both inspiring and sobering.

Apart from the Pandoh settlement, I also interviewed Tibetan refugees living outside the Mandi district settlement. I observed that the major concerns for these Tibetan refugees were the stability issue and insecurity regarding economic insurance. Most of these participants used to run small shops and expressed concern about rising rent prices. Their significant efforts were directed towards meeting the challenges of the exiled life rather than engaging in the political sphere for Tibet's social movement. A similar phenomenon was observed in the interviews of the participants from the Pandoh settlement. Fieldwork, I realised, is as much about observing as it is about introspection. There were moments when I questioned my role as a researcher—what it meant to document the stories of a marginalised refugee community and how I could do so ethically and responsibly. Was I taking more than I was giving back? How could I ensure that my work honoured the voices of those who had trusted me with their stories? These questions became a constant undercurrent, shaping my approach and reminding me of the weight of representation. This experience also emphasised the importance of humility in research. As an outsider, I was often acutely aware of the privileges I carried and the gaps in my understanding. Yet, the kindness and openness of the residents reminded me of the value of human connection.

Sharing meals, exchanging smiles, and listening deeply to their stories created bonds that transcended the formalities of the researcher-participant relationship.

Fieldwork in Pandoh was not just a data collection exercise—it was a transformative journey that taught me patience, adaptability, and the profound importance of empathy. It deepened my understanding of displacement and identity, not just as abstract concepts but as lived realities that shape the everyday lives of people. Above all, it reminded me that research is not simply about finding answers—it is about asking better questions and allowing oneself to be changed in the process. Similarly, every interview helped me refine my questions and add new perspectives to my understanding of Tibetan refugees in India. Also, since it was my first time, I am aware that I was carried away with emotions at some point, struggling to maintain my researcher's positionality. That is why the emotional writing style adopted to describe the data collection experience during the first phase here is deliberate. It does not only portray the reflexive account of my experience with Tibetan refugees living in Pandoh settlements and nearby areas but also reflects my mental state during those times.

Phase II: The Bylakuppe Settlement

The second phase of fieldwork for this research was conducted in Bylakuppe in November 2019. Bylakuappe was the first Tibetan refugee settlement established in the Mysore district of Karnataka in 1961. Recognised as one of the largest Tibetan settlements in India, Bylakuppe presented a distinct field setting, assimilating traditional Tibetan cultural and religious aspects in the lives of exiled refugees. All the infrastructures, including monasteries or educational setups, were built in a traditional style. My experience collecting data in this settlement provided

valuable insights into a well-organised refugee community's social and political environment while reflecting on the challenges and learning opportunities inherent in conducting qualitative research.

The administrative framework of the settlement played a significant role in shaping my research experience. Unlike the Pandoh settlement, which was less formal, Bylakuppe had a well-defined governance system. Before conducting my work, I had to secure permission from the administrative officials, which required multiple visits and a lot of convincing. While these procedures added to the initial hardships, they also highlighted the settlement's organised nature, which had likely contributed to its success in sustaining a self-sufficient community. Access to the settlement required building a network of connections as it was administratively well organised, and conducting research needed permission from the authorities. As a researcher for the first time in Karnataka, I was unfamiliar with the area and the local language, I initially reached out to a research fellow who connected me with one of his relatives who was originally from Mysore. This relative, in turn, introduced me to a Tibetan resident of Bylakuppe who was studying with him at the same university, and eventually, he became my gatekeeper. The gatekeeper's deep familiarity with the community and personal rapport with its members were critical in facilitating my entry into the settlement. His role went beyond introductions—he explained the cultural and social settings of the settlement in detail, equipping me to approach participants with a basic understanding of how it feels to be part of their community.

Image 1.1: The cloister in Sera Jey Monastery in Bylakuppe.

Language was another challenging aspect of my fieldwork in Bylakuppe. Most residents were more comfortable speaking Tibetan, Kannada or English than Hindi. As a result, I conducted the majority of interviews in English. This required careful framing of explanations in a comprehensive style to ensure clarity and mutual understanding, as English was not the native language for either myself or my participants. One memorable interaction involved a monk who

shared his migration story from Tibet to India. He spoke slowly, often pausing to search for the right words to convey his emotions. These pauses underscored the weight of his experiences and reminded me of the importance of patience and active listening in qualitative research.

Bylakuppe itself was entirely different from the Pandoh settlement that I had visited just a few days back. Its infrastructure was well-developed, housing large monasteries, schools, a hospital, and even a museum dedicated to Tibetan history and culture. Unlike some refugee communities where cultural practices may become subdued over time, the settlement was culturally active, with Tibetan flags fluttering above houses and streets lined with small shops selling traditional handicrafts. Bylakuppe emerged as a replica of Tibet, where Tibetan identity remained intact in its true essence and actively preserved. Observing the routines, interactions, and celebrations of the settlement offered an understanding of how cultural continuity was maintained and adapted within a diaspora context. Further, large prayer wheels were strategically placed in common areas, and young and old residents would pause during their daily routines to spin them while reciting prayers. These simple yet profound acts of devotion were seamlessly integrated into their everyday lives, reflecting a community deeply rooted in its spiritual traditions. Unlike the makeshift housing and resource constraints often associated with refugee communities, Bylakuppe emerged as stable and structured, reflecting decades of establishment efforts and growth.

The monasteries of Bylakuppe were central to the community's cultural and spiritual life. Two major monasteries- Sera and Namdroling- stood out not only as places of worship but as dynamic cultural institutions. I observed their daily activities and saw monks engaged in debates, chanting rituals, and ceremonial preparations. During my stay, I would often attend prayer sessions at Namdroling Monastery, where the vibrant sound of chanting and the rhythmic beating

of drums reflected the Tibetans' commitment to preserving their cultural and religious aspects. The ceremony was both disciplined and diligent, highlighting religion's role in maintaining the Tibetan diaspora's collective identity.

Image 1.2: Sera Jey Monastery.

Education also played a key role in preserving Tibetan traditions in Bylakuppe. Schools within the settlement provided formal education alongside lessons in Tibetan language, history, and Buddhist philosophy. In one classroom I visited, children were reciting Tibetan scripts with remarkable fluency, their voices a testament to the deliberate efforts to pass down linguistic and cultural knowledge to the next generation. Teachers I spoke with emphasised the importance of

grounding children in their heritage, even as they prepared them to face the challenges of the modern world. This dual focus on cultural preservation and contemporary relevance was a recurring theme throughout the settlement. Similarly, daily routines also reflected the active practice of traditions. Many households had altars dedicated to Buddhist deities adorned with butter lamps, offerings of fruits, and bowls of water. In the mornings, it was common to see elders performing prostrations outside their homes or walking around the monasteries in clockwise circumambulation—a practice known as *kora*. These acts of devotion, often carried out in the presence of children, served as everyday reminders of faith and continuity.

Image 1.3: Sera Jey Monastic University.

While tradition was deeply woven into daily life, Bylakuppe also demonstrated adaptability in integrating modern influences. Many younger residents I interacted with expressed pride in their heritage while embracing global opportunities, such as pursuing higher education or careers outside the settlement. Yet, even those who had ventured abroad expressed their desire to return during festivals or to support their families in preserving Tibetan traditions. This duality—of engaging with the wider world while remaining anchored in their cultural roots—seemed to define the ethos of Bylakuppe. Despite the strong cultural presence, the residents of Bylakuppe were acutely aware of the fragility of their identity as a diaspora community. Several participants expressed concerns about the younger generation losing touch with their roots, mainly as they pursued opportunities outside the settlement. However, they also spoke of collective efforts to counteract this, such as cultural workshops, mentorship programs, and initiatives to document oral histories. These proactive measures reflected the community's resilience and determination to safeguard their heritage. Bylakuppe stood out as a settlement where tradition and culture were not merely remembered but actively lived. The residents' commitment to preserving their identity in both overt and subtle ways was evident in every aspect of daily life, from rituals and festivals to education and community interactions. This vibrancy was a powerful reminder that cultural continuity is not a passive process but an ongoing effort shaped by collective intent and action.

The settlement's institutional facilities also influenced the way I approached data collection. The presence of schools and educational institutes meant that many younger residents had a strong command over English, making it easier to engage with them. However, this contrasted with older participants, whose limited English proficiency required additional effort to bridge the communication gap. In one instance, a middle-aged shopkeeper, although fluent in English, often

resorted to Tibetan phrases to express culturally specific concepts. These moments required assistance from those who were fluent in the Tibetan language. Fortunately, the gatekeeper assisted me in all interviews and played the role of translator whenever required.

My gatekeeper's insights into the community proved seminal throughout the research process. As a native of Bylakuppe, he shared inside knowledge about the settlement's history, its growth over the years, and the interconnectedness among residents. One story that he was listening to from childhood stood out in my memory; it was his description of the settlement's early days when the community had to overcome resource crises and survival challenges to establish itself in a foreign land. These accounts added new perspectives to my understanding of the Tibetan community in exile and provided a mindset against which I could contextualise the narratives shared during interviews.

Visiting the settlement's museum also deepened my understanding of Tibetan culture and history. The exhibits featured artefacts from Tibet, photographs of the migration journey, and documents detailing the struggles and resilience of the Tibetan people. Walking through the museum with my gatekeeper, I was influenced by the sense of loss and preservation that permeated the displays. This visit complemented the oral histories I was gathering, offering a multidimensional perspective on the community's experiences. Despite its well-resourced environment, the settlement presented its own challenges. The scale of Bylakuppe meant that it was impossible to form the close, informal connections often associated with smaller field sites. My interactions were shaped by the structured nature of the settlement, where participants often viewed me through a formal lens. This required me to adapt my approach, balancing professionalism with a genuine effort to connect on a human level.

Reflecting on my fieldwork, I became acutely aware of my positionality as an outsider. My dependence on a gatekeeper and the linguistic and identity obstacles in gaining access emphasise the importance of building trust incrementally. I was conscious of how my presence and background influenced participants' willingness to share their stories and how these interactions, in turn, shaped my interpretations. This reflexive process was not merely a methodological exercise but an ethical responsibility to ensure that my research accurately represented the voices of those who participated. The fieldwork at Bylakuppe was a learning experience in many ways. It highlighted the importance of flexibility, patience, and cultural sensitivity in qualitative research. The structured environment and resource-rich nature of the settlement provided a unique setting that differed significantly from more precarious refugee communities. At the same time, the human stories of migration, loss, and resilience shared by the participants reminded me of the universality of certain experiences, regardless of context. Ultimately, this fieldwork reinforced the value of immersion and reflexivity in qualitative research. By engaging with the community, observing its daily life, and listening to its stories, I gained insights that went beyond the data itself. It was a reminder that fieldwork is not just about collecting information but about understanding the people behind the narratives—and, in the process, understanding oneself as a researcher.

Phase III: A Day in the Life of Tibetans in Sarnath

Context

The third and final data collection phase was conducted in March 2023. Though there were multiple trips to the field over a duration of two months, the field research on March 10, 2023,

known as Uprising Day, holds much significance for the research, as it was significant for Tibetans living in exile. There was a significant gap in the data collection period between the first two phases and the final phase because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Uprising Day is a symbolic event for Tibetans residing across the world to gather together to march, protest, or perform the Tibetan remembrance rituals to pay tribute to the martyrs of the past who lost their lives on the day of 10th March 1959 due to China's surprise attack on Lhasa and other areas of Tibet, and all those who died fighting for the freedom of Tibet since then. It also serves as a platform for them to attract the world's attention and remind humans that a few communities still suffer under colonial life in the era of freedom and justice.

Thus, I designed the interview schedule to record the meaning of Uprising Day for the Tibetans of Sarnath and cover the study's objective. I was aware that I might be unable to go through every question because the interview schedule was lengthy (on purpose), and it may appear as lethargic to my respondents. Thus, I improvised my interviewing skills according to the participant's designation, gender, age or affiliation. For instance, if I was talking to an authority figure/administrative representative, my focus was more on knowing the strategies they adopt to gain the participation of Tibetans in such events or how they motivate Tibetan refugees to join their struggle towards freedom. Similarly, if I were dealing with the elderly population, I would also want to know about their opinions on the future generation of Tibetan refugees and their expectations of them.

Observation Note About the Site of Data Collection

Sarnath, located on the outskirts of Varanasi city, has mainly evolved as a tourist site, attracting the world's attention primarily for archaeological structures related to the Buddhist and Mauryan empires. However, beyond the rudimentary image of Sarnath known to the world, its unsung significance lies in the fact that it is a conglomeration of various cultural communities living together in harmony, for instance, the local population of Varanasi, the Cambodian community and the Tibetan community. It is interesting to observe that the owners of most restaurants and shops are locals who are offering foods and materials specific to the Buddhist community, especially Tibetan communities, such as the Lhasa tea stall (in front of Tibetan Central University) or most shops selling the portraits of His Holiness Dalai Lama. And their consumers are primarily people who share a different culture. Another critical factor to Sarnath is the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), an educational institution offering various social sciences courses (and medical) to Tibetan diaspora youths. The vision is to preserve, research, and update the ancient knowledge system of both Tibetan and Indian civilisation. Interestingly, Sarnath is not another Tibetan settlement-in-exile. Simply put, it is a place (from a Tibetan perspective) with different monasteries run by various Buddhist communities from a few Asian countries like Cambodia. It employs Tiebtans to care for archaeological sites and has a central university for Tibetan youths.

Why Sarnath?

The obvious question that may strike the readers is why I chose Sarnath to cover Uprising Day when big settlements like Dharamshala and Bylakuppe organised such events enormously. For the same reason, I selected Sarnath for my field report. Sometimes, the stories from the centre

may be the most authentic, but one can also find the true missing links in the peripheral regions. Here, Sarnath is referred to as a peripheral region for the Tibetan refugees not because of its location but in terms of its administrative and governance structure. Another aspect that interested me is that Tibetan refugees live in different parts of a small spatial region of Sarnath; they live among the locals, and there is no defined boundary wall separating Tibetans from the locals. Thus, studying how they maintain their Tibetan-ness will help me to understand what identity, policy, preservation, and nationality factors contribute to the daily practices of nationalism and mobilisation in a refugee's life.

Also, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) makes Sarnath a hub of the Tibetan youth population. In addition to providing them security regarding food, shelter, and scholarship, the institution's administrative structure nourishes the youth to preserve their culture, language, national identity and its attributes in exile. The youth see themselves as the storm of efforts capable of spreading awareness about Tiebtans' grievances and sufferings through education and modern means of protest. Irrespective of such crucial aspects, Sarnath has received almost negligible attention from scholars compared to places like Dharamshala or Sikkim. Studying Sarnath is seminal in portraying a near-to-complete image of Tibet in exile. For such reasons, I selected Sarnath as my sample population to cover the Uprising Day of 2023.

The Gatekeeper

My visits to the CITHS started in January of 2023. In one of my visits, I learned about the Uprising Day event. On enquiring, I was asked to talk to someone from the office whom I could approach for information about the event on Uprising Day 2023. I was directed to the

administrative office, who advised me to approach the assistant registrar. I did the same and found a very helpful gatekeeper who contributed genuinely to make this field work successful. He told me that since CIHTS is a government institute, it cannot be involved in any kind of political protest.

Also, no such political protest happened in Sarnath, but only a small gathering in one of the monasteries where the message of His Holiness Dalai Lama was read to the Tibetan people by one of the concerned authorities. I asked him about the place where the 2023 Uprising Day is going to happen. However, he needed clarification about the place and timing, so he told us to call five to six days before the Uprising Day to remind him once again. After a few days, I learned from him that the 2023 Uprising Day would happen in the Two Lions Temple (Tibetan temple) at Sarnath at 9 AM. He also said I would meet one of his friends there who could help me with basic information. Even though my gatekeeper was not there with me, his efforts proved seminal in making me feel welcomed in a cross-cultural setting.

Preparations

The interview schedule was designed based on prior interview questions during the first two phases of the studies, which were conducted in the summer and winter of 2019. I shortlisted all the potent questions asked to participants in the previous fieldwork, including those which yielded interesting responses and then categorised them sub-theme-wise. After going through the objective of the fieldwork that I already wrote in brief, I added a few more questions. Questions related to national and refugee identity, present challenges in exile, the reason for cultural and religious preservation, how they contribute towards their community cause in everyday life and

feeling of group efficacy were given priority by the researcher. After discussing the final list of questions with my supervisor, I finalised the interview schedule. Questions that form the crux of my interviews for the final phase of data collection are:

What do you think about your national identity?

What do you think distinguishes Tibetans from other people?

What kind of feeling do you get when you say you are a Refugee?

Do you think it is necessary to preserve Tibetan culture?

How do you preserve Tibetan culture and religion in your everyday life?

How important is the Dalai Lama for Tibet as a nation?

Have you participated in protests?

What do you think makes Tibetan people come together for protests?

However, as mentioned initially, my approach was broader than these questions. I improvised my follow-up questions in relevant situations based on participants' responses, affiliation, age and gender. I thoroughly discussed, rehearsed and addressed doubts with each other a day before the field visit.

The Ceremony

While passing through CIHTS (since it comes before the Two Lion Temple if one comes from the city side), I saw around 10-12 Tibetan students (both boys and girls) in front of the university gate. They dressed in traditional outfits; some were playing musical instruments (drums and flutes), and one boy was talking to the autorickshaw driver. I approached them and asked

whether they were going for the Uprising Day, to which they said “yes”. I confirmed the event's location with them, and then we finally reached the temple around 8:20 AM.

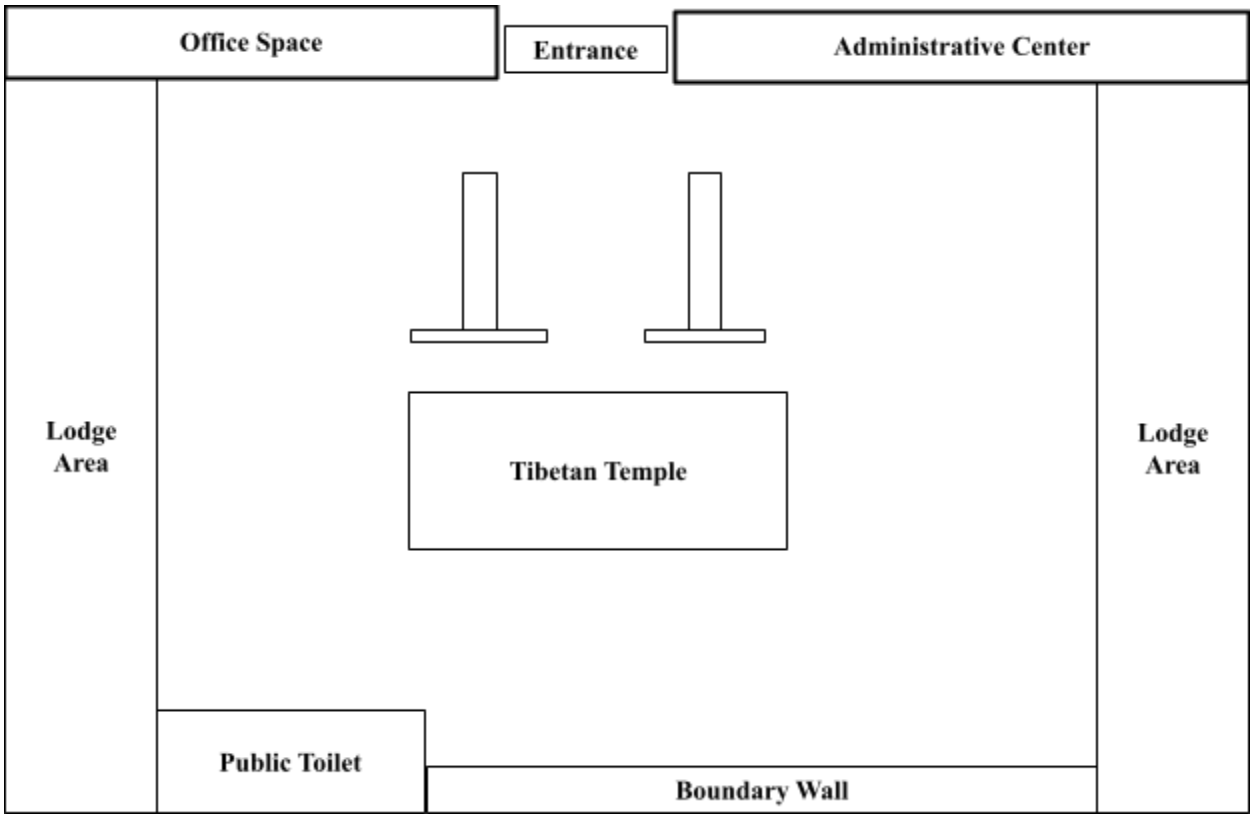

Figure 1.0: A rough map of the Tibetan Temple situated in Sarnath.

I have already been to the Two Lion Temple twice, but this time, I entered the place with a researcher’s mindset. Like most Tibetan monasteries, every nook and corner reflects Tibetan-ness. It has around 15 to 18 feet high entrance gate with a sculpture of two lions at the position of guarding a gate. The structure was rectangular, bounded by a u-shaped - from the left of the main entrance to its right side - administrative office-lodge-public washroom-other utility space-lodge-office space. The main temple was in the middle of this U-shaped structure, surrounded by empty space. The temple aligns with the entrance gate, and a small lane directs

straight to the temple door. Plants and flower pots walled this lane. One Stupa was also on the right side, approximately 10 feet from the entrance door. The Stupa was signifying the place of India inside Tibetan-ness.

The place was not decorated much for the event; only two poles were installed to host both Tibetan and Indian flags. The approach was minimalist. Only a handful of people were there since I reached the place forty minutes earlier. I went directly to the main temple and found the person (our introducer for the day) was inside the temple, and then went to inform him about me. I decided to take off my shoes to go inside the temple.

By that time, I saw the man I was searching for, who approached us with a smile. He must be in his late 40s and dressed in a Tibetan traditional style. I started introducing myself as "*I am a research scholar from IIT(BHU) and intend to cover the uprising day along with interviewing a few participants and also if he could tell us something about today's event then it would be beneficial for me*". He was listening to me with a kind smile on his face. While maintaining the smile on his face, he told me that first, they would host the Tibetan (by the Chief Guest, the Vice Chancellor of CIHTS) and Indian flag (by one of the senior professors of the same institute). The students will sing the Tibetan national anthem, the Indian national anthem and a remembrance song. After that, they will read the message of His Holiness Dalai Lama inside the temple. He also said I could get the English translation of The Dalai Lama's message after two to three days. He added that the main volunteers for the event are the students of CIHTS, and the event is organised for them as well. So, it became clear that the organisation, participation in rituals and singing, and other management were primarily conducted by the institute's administrative and

student wings. He happily said “Sure” when asked permission to photograph the event and conduct interviews. When I asked him when we should take his interview or at least if I have his number, he politely replied that he was not the right person to talk about the Uprising Day and recommended that I interview the person who will host the Indian flag as he has meaningful insights on the Tibetan issue. He added that since that professor has not arrived yet, he will let us know once the professor arrives. After this, I went to the lodging side and sat on the platform, waiting for the ceremony to start.

Most of the people arrived by 9 AM. The 70 to 90-person crowd included mostly Tibetan students, monks and elders, a few foreign tourists (who left the place after the remembrance song) and only one Indian, that is me. There was a dress code for Tibetan students who participated in singing and music activities while other students wore traditional dresses. Most of the people there were in their traditional dresses, and monks were in their religious outfits.

The event started with the Tibetan flag hosted by the Vice Chancellor of CIHTS, and then the Indian flag was hosted by one of the professors from the same university. After this, the student performers sang the Tibetan national anthem, standing in two lines (some were singers, while others were there to play flute and drums). Most Tibetan attendees were singing along with them while I was just there watching in silence. The Indian national anthem followed it, and surprisingly, many Tibetan attendees knew the anthem and hummed it in rhythm, too. However, most did not maintain an attention position (according to the Indian constitution, those who sing or listen to the Indian national anthem must do so by maintaining an attention position) and just stood in a relaxed position.

Image 1.4. From left to right. A) Students standing in front of the main Tibetan temple to sing anthems and remembrance songs. B) People sitting on the lodging platform waiting for the ceremony to start. C) The Chief Guest hosts the Tibetan flag while students are singing the Tibetan national anthem. D) The hosted Indian flag. E) Students sing and play musical instruments for the Tibetan national anthem, Indian national anthem, and remembrance day song. Source: Researcher

Surprisingly, just when the national anthem of India ended, some random boy from the crowd half-shouted '*Bharat mata ki jai*'. However, the voice was neither loud nor sufficiently determined to catch the attention of nearby people. They concluded the national anthem ceremony by singing a 'remembrance song' (it is a song composed initially to pay tribute towards the martyrs who lost their lives when China attacked Tibet on 10th March 1959 and remember the sacrifice of all those Tibetans who lost their lives fighting for the Tibetan cause). After that, everyone (most Tibetans), including the chief guest, started going inside the main Temple. But I decided to wait for a while and let these Tibetan people settle well inside the Temple, and then I would go to cover further. However, while waiting, I thought these people might want to return to their places soon after the ceremony, and I may not get enough participants to interview.

My first interviewee was a 24-year-old boy pursuing a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) from CIHTS. He was dressed in a Tibetan dress and appeared excited for the interview. Talking to him and other CIHTS students, I realised that they were well aware of the Tibetan issue; they sincerely listened to all my questions and replied with rich insights. The confidence in their voices and determination in their tones was noticeable. In places where the interviewee's friends were also standing nearby, they listened to the conversation with great patience and many times intervened in between to express their opinions. The attention showed how much interest they took in participating in the present study as they felt that it was for Tibet's cause. It also shows how much they are serious about contributing to the welfare of their community and nation. Many respondents expressed gratitude to me for studying Tibet as my thesis project. Also, many wish that there should be more out-group members who would study the case of Tibetans.

One unexpected challenge that I faced was interviewing a 24-year-old boy pursuing a B.Ed degree from CIHTS. This boy enthusiastically came forward for the interview (his body language indicated that he had paid enough attention to my conversations with two of his friends that I already interviewed, and now he already knew what he had to say in the interview). He belongs to a Tibetan community in Ladakh. He shared that he is an Indian-Tibetan since his parents and their ancestors were from the same Ladakh, but they identify as Tibetan. This phenomenon strikes me as new, as I knew there were Tibetan communities (basically nomads). Still, I did not realise that many are Indian by nation-state but Tibetan by nationalist sentiment. I had trouble framing the follow-up questions, so I inquired more about the same topic before moving to other aspects of our study. I found his views more straightforward and determined than the rest of our participants. He was adamant about his thoughts on the Tibetan cause, as he strongly identified as Tibetan before his Indian identity.

After interviewing my first participant, I was standing near the Two-Lions temple to approach those who were coming out of the temple as the ceremony was about to finish. At that time, my first participant approached me and suggested that I should also ask my interviewees about the challenges that Tibetan youths face while living in a refugee settlement. I immediately added this to my interview schedule and asked the same question to the participants I interviewed later that day. My second interviewee was entirely different from the earlier participants. He is a professor from CIHTS reputed for his knowledge and academic experience. He was in his late 65s and had a high-spirited personality. I was a bit nervous to interview him. Should I ask the same questions I focused on in our earlier interviews, or would he mind if I asked questions based on his

personal experiences? However, I decided to start with the questions on the organisation, execution, and significance of the Uprising Day, followed by the strategies of the present administrative body in exile towards the Tibetan cause. The plan was to move to sensitive issues, such as his experience as a refugee and similar aspects, once we become more comfortable with each other.

The professor had a rich knowledge of Tibetan historical, social, political, and geographical aspects. Interestingly, the last sentence of many of his replies was, "*There is always a light at the end of the tunnel*". Even if I fail to record his experience as a refugee in-depth, his insights led me to explore some dimensions of the Tibetan issue from a socio-political perspective that was missing earlier. The interview ran for 76 minutes before he asked us, "That should be enough", patted my right leg and stood up to leave.

Noon

Image 1.5: These posters represent a campaign initiated by one of the students of CIHTS against China's education policy for Tibetan students in Tibet—source: Field Scholars.

Another interview that remains very important for the present work is of a research scholar from CIHTS and who is also a political activist and is currently associated with one of the Tibetan youth organisations devoted to the Tibetan cause. The Tibetan cause that I am repeatedly referring to is a two-fold objective: first is to gain Tibetan independence from the Chinese occupation, and second is to free Tibetans from the suffering of atrocities and human rights violations under Chinese governance. This research scholar is a married man who is leading a petition-signing campaign against the colonisation of the Tibetan education system (in Tibet) under the communist government. He introduced his campaign to me and asked me to sign the petition. He requested me to take a few photographs with him while holding the campaign's pamphlet in hand. His campaign (see Image 1.5) during the occasion of Uprising Day indicates a space-making process where every event is treated as an opportunity for Tibetan refugees to represent their political and social causes.

In Canteen

As the ceremony was over and the people left for their home. I also left the place and went to CIHTS to cover the evening peaceful march organised by the students of CIHTS. Here, the participant who was a political activist, played the role of both gatekeeper and translator. He met me again at the institute's gate and took me to the campus canteen. The canteen was a two-floor space with a semi-open kitchen and billing counter space, and the rest of the space was for the customers. It was well maintained, and the interior was decorated with their cultural and

religious touch. The left side (left to the canteen entrance door) wall was decorated with the frames of His Holiness Dalai Lama and the creative sketch arts such as His Holiness's blessing being the source of earth's conservation, symbolic suffering of Tibetans and Dalai Lama being the symbolic saviour. While I watched the details of Tibetan-ness embedded inside the canteen, the gatekeeper entered with a young Tibetan girl. He introduced me to her, and I learned she is also a research scholar working on a Pali language project. There were only one or two more individuals having food from the canteen. So, the whole place was mostly empty, peaceful and perfect for conducting the interviews.

Image 1.6: The artworks representing Tibetan religious leaders on the canteen wall.

I started interviewing the female research scholar around and came to know that she was born in Nepal, and her parents were exiled from Tibet at a young age and settled in Nepal. After completing her primary education at Tibetan Children's Village, she came to CIHTS in 2010 for her higher education. This interview, in particular, proved significant as it provided an alternative perspective essential to understanding a life in exile. Her responses towards the Tibetan issue and attitude towards her own national and refugee identity made me realise that before understanding the refugee-ness among Tibetans, it is equally important to understand the commonality that this population shares with the rest of the human race, i.e., the essential human nature of finding meaning in being the same as the rest, perceiving oneself as an ordinary human being, and realising the importance of everyday facilities that one gets in exile. Her carefree attitude, blended with a sincere concern for the Tibetan cause, initially disturbed my understanding of the term refugee. The part of interview questions framed to grasp the helplessness of a refugee's life proved useless here. Every day for her was an uprising, and she still felt no intensive relative deprivation in exile. She was happy and satisfied with her life and still chose to preserve Tibetan culture for the nation. The interview was a strong statement to the academicians, 'Tibetans too are humans'. She also shared her gratitude that I am working on Tibet as a research topic and was interested in learning more about my research topic.

Another challenge that I faced was interviewing a participant from Bhutan who was recently admitted to CIHTS and needed to learn more English and Hindi. So, the second gatekeeper agreed to the role of a translator. The translator first had to translate my questions into Tibetan, and the participant's replies were translated back into Hindi. The most remarkable thing about the interview was the patience and determination with which I had to ask questions and listen to

his response (both in a translated language and the language that I did not understand), the focus with which the participant was trying to listen and frame his replies, but most importantly the double effort invested by the translator (the second gatekeeper) without being distracted or losing focus throughout the interview.

One distinct case that I remember clearly is taking an interview of a young Tibetan girl who at the age of sixteen, fled Tibet through the dangerous journey of Himalayan secret routes just to learn and exercise traditional aspects of her ethnic Tibet. She elaborately expressed her experience of spending 16 years in Tibet suffering under Chinese rule. She somehow managed to escape Tibet, but till then, she could not freely talk to her relatives back in Tibet over the phone. As she expressed, the Chinese government is tapping all the phone calls. If someone discusses political or religious matters, they will be scrutinised by the authorities in Tibet. She was particularly vigorous when talking about the education system under the Chinese government. As it is a threat to their culture, language, and overall true identity, which is Tibetan. Interview with her induces validation in the claims of early literature that highlights the plight of Tibetans living under the communist China's regime. It was a different experience for me as reading about such things is a different thing, but listening to someone's experiences invokes entirely different sets of emotions and empathy.

The March

Image 1.7: Tibetan students leaving the main gate of CIHTS for the candle march.

Around 170-190 students were participating in the march. The march started from the university campus and was supposed to end at the Sarnath Temple. To avoid inconvenience, the students walked on the left side of the road by forming a single line. They all were disciplined, and as far as I can observe, no student tried to break the line or interfere with the drill. It was a long train of young students in their traditional dresses reciting mantras (not loud enough to be classified as a shout) and holding their candles whose tops were covered by a use and throw cup (to protect the flame from the wind). Their faces were calm, showing no sign of anger. They avoided eye contact with the passersby and focused on their candles and those in front. Only a few students used their mobile phones to take pictures and videos. To my surprise, I could not find any student who particularly has been assigned the task of taking photos and videos, which is a common phenomenon in most events worldwide. I followed them till the very next left turn, took some more pictures and then decided to call it a day.

Image 1.8: A Tibetan student carrying an Indian flag on his shoulder while heading to join the candle march.

Understanding the minute details of the nature of the march from the perspectives of Jurstakova, Evangelos and Reicher's (2024) work, the aspect of disciplined participation and symbolic expression through candles and flags reflects a sense of unity and shared purpose. Further, the mantras' recitation (not loud enough) indicates a disciplined form of expression sharing homogeneity in thought and process as well as uniformity of identity enactment. Similarly, the students' calm demeanour and avoidance of eye contact with passersby indicate a within-group rooted focus. However, marching still carries meaning beyond outward expression. In contexts where symbolic action holds weight, seemingly apolitical gatherings can serve as implicit affirmations of group identity, continuity, and resilience.

Nevertheless, the field report can only conclude that it is still more potent to explore the life of Tibetans in exile rather than attempt to understand and explain it from a theoretical lens. Thus, a descriptive account of Tibetan voices would make more sense than implementing any interpretative phenomenological tool.

Words

Countless people may have visited Sarnath until now, but only a few might know what lies beyond the materialistic infrastructure and archaeological sites. Among the exotic decorations and fancy restaurants with fancier names lives a community that tries to live an ordinary life in an extraordinary situation. I, too, expected the extraordinariness from these communities on the Uprising Day and approached with a hope to record only criticality, to meet a group of individuals who inhale chauvinism and exhale rebellion, and to invoke only deprivation from them. However, now that I think about it, it would more likely be my story on the day of the India versus Pakistan cricket match; I was never interviewed after India lost to Pakistan in a World Cup match. In that sense, they were far more well-behaved, calm and composed, and peace-oriented, at least more than me. Such comparisons are not drawn to construct in-group versus out-group categories. I highlight the biases I might have introduced in my fieldwork with such words.

All the participants were associated with the CIHTS, which must have provided them with a sense of security and engaged their minds in academic activities. That may be why many were content with their lifestyle and did not express strong feelings of relative deprivation. Also, most of these young minds have yet to visit Tibet or were exiled in their early childhood; the only picture they have constructed about Tibet is through news channels, social media, and oral narratives. I find that the closest thing to Tibet that they can relate to is His Holiness Dalai Lama. It felt that they were seeing their political future and cultural realities through the vision of His Holiness Dalai Lama. All of my participants had deep faith in His Holiness Dalai Lama. As my first participant expressed, "*Yes! I believe in the Dalai Lama, my life is for the Dalai Lama, and if*

it comes to that, I am ready to die for the Dalai Lama". I started perceiving them as pixels of the Dalai Lama's portrait at one point. However, I know that it cannot be generalised. There are also youth organisations whose ideological discontent may display a pixelated picture of the Dalai Lama if zoomed in enough. But I still have to capture that dimension.

Being a victim of cognitive processes, my perception of Tibetans mainly depended on the differences regarding appearance, dressing style, dialect, and infrastructural distinctiveness. When I was inside the Tibetan temple, it felt like I was somewhere else, somewhere alien where I do not belong, and when I perceive them on the roads of Sarnath, I perceive that they are somewhere else, somewhere alien where they do not belong. Such conflicts of the cross-cultural psyche and my position as an outsider refrained me from knowing them beyond their social identity. They all seemed determined to contribute to their nation's cause and the best way to do it is to preserve cultural and religious attributes. It required bringing traditional virtues into daily practices. As expressed by one of my participants, "*We follow white Wednesday every week, where we dress up in our traditional dresses, offer prayers in more rigorous style and have traditional foods, as an attempt to preserve our cultural values*". Over time, such stylised repetition gradually shaped well-defined mental borders among our participants' schema, piloting them in what they are and are not. I observed the reflection of their mental borders in small things, such as when I asked the guards later if they were aware of the candle march, but the guards refused and said these students never informed them about anything. Also, many of my participants seemed a little reluctant to talk in Hindi as all preferred to have the interview in English despite many having spent a significant period among Hindi speakers. It may be because most came to Sarnath from non-Hindi-speaking parts such as Arunachal Pradesh and Nepal and

knew that learning English could give them an edge in their careers. However, such remarks need greater exploration, mainly focused on the mentioned phenomena, and as of now, my field observation is subjected to challenges.

When asked why they participated in the Uprising Day, they said it was 'for Tibet'. When I asked one of the respondents why she was not participating, she simply replied that she had a class to attend and that every day was a Uprising Day for her. Also, most of these students are studying to pursue their future in Tibetan institutes, which they perceive as a way of serving their nation. Both the research scholars I interviewed were working on Tibetan culture and language. They think it is a way of preserving their traditional virtues, eventually contributing to the Tibetan cause. The question about how they feel about their refugee identity failed to invoke any concrete response as most respondents were blank on how to respond. They were unable to relate to the questions on refugee-ness except in terms of being unable to visit Tibet. This made me realise later that they associate their existence in exile more strongly with their Tibetan identity than their refugee identity. Besides everything, I observed an occasion in the life of people who live a life expected of them as social beings, no matter how abnormal we desire it to be.

Relevance of the Field Report in the Present Context

The field report is particularly relevant in the present context as it provides a direct experience and new directions for understanding how Tibetan refugees organise their lives in exile. Through fieldwork conducted in settlements like Pandoh, Byalakuppe, and Sarnath, the report captures the mico-details embedded in their daily lives, both within and outside the settlements, exhibiting a shared mindset of contributing to the Tibetan cause. Such a determined attitude is deeply rooted

in their everyday activities, from community gatherings and prayer rituals to political protests and cultural preservation efforts. Observing this mobilised way of life is essential for understanding how Tibetan refugees sustain and exercise their nationalist sentiments within a diasporic context, which is a central objective of the thesis. The fieldwork also sheds light on the deep-rooted sense of non-belongingness that pervades the lives of Tibetan refugees. Despite their long-standing presence in India, there is a lasting sense among the participants that their stay is temporary and they are merely guests awaiting their eventual return to Tibet. Such distressing sentiments highlight their collective identity and reinforce their commitment to Tibet's struggle, shaping their cognitive and behavioural frameworks.

Further, first-hand observational notes provide an additional layer of validation to the research findings. By directly engaging with the community, the field report corroborates the central argument of the thesis that the Tibetan social movement is part of a larger struggle strategy. It is deeply embedded in the cognitive and behavioural frames of the participants. These frames enable them to negotiate their dual identities—national and refugee—while organising their lives in ways that make mobilisation an integral and continuous phenomenon. Thus, this field report not only contextualises the study but also substantiates its findings. It reinforces the conclusion that the Tibetan diaspora's nationalist sentiments are mobilised and maintained through everyday lived realities that bridge personal identity and collective activism.

Summary

This chapter acknowledges that qualitative researchers are not 'tabula rasa' but instead enter the field with their own preconceived notions and cultural conditionings. Then, the chapter provides

an overview of how the researcher, during the present fieldwork, balanced his position as an outsider with different cultural assumptions and as a researcher who should not lead his cognitive bias, which influences the standard of the present qualitative study. The chapter includes an observational and reflective note of his experiences during the fieldwork conducted in the Pandoh settlement, Bylakuppe settlement, and Sarnath. It outlines characteristics of this fieldwork in a descriptive manner that involves describing challenges like finding a gatekeeper, gaining clearance from the settlement officers, managing language barriers, handling cultural differences, building rapport, and describing minute details in every nook and corner of the visited Tibetan settlements. The chapter ends with concluding remarks on how the field experience remains potent for establishing the need for the upcoming chapter to understand the exiled Tibetan community through a relatively new approach. The fieldwork makes the researcher realise that apart from the challenges of exile, life in India has become customary for them. They live their exiled lives more driven by their national identity than their refugee identity. Further, protesting and struggling for Tibet's cause has become integral to their life choices.