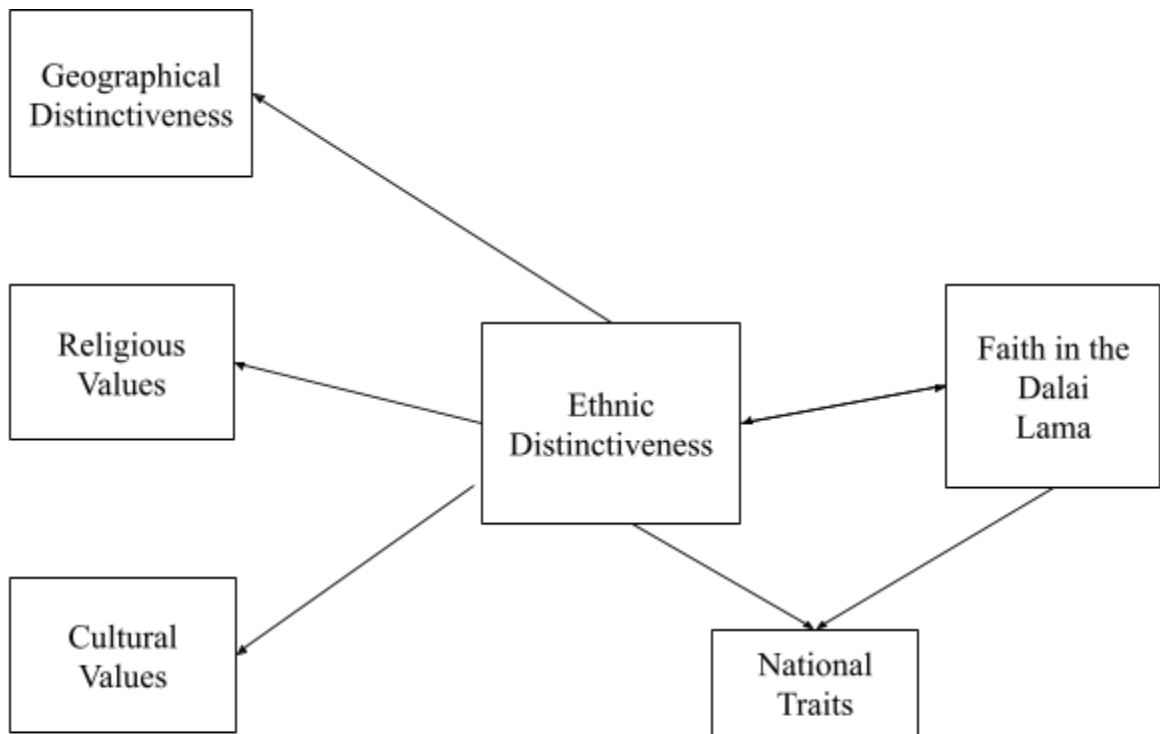


## **Chapter 5**

### **Tibetan National Identity: Imagination, Identification, Belongingness and Defining “True”**

#### **Tibetans**

The analysis section of the chapter discusses three main themes as observed in our data set. The first theme, “Ethnic Distinctiveness,” is based on the participants’ conversations about how they treat the ethnic values of their culture and religion and the geographical features of their nation as distinct from other communities and categorize them as the core of their Tibetan identity. The two sub-themes here, namely, “Religious Values” and “Cultural Values,” outline how belief in the ancestral philosophy specific to Tibet as a nation helps shape an understanding of themselves, their Tibetan identity, their surroundings, and the enemy of their nation. The second theme discusses how unconditional faith in the Dalai Lama encourages collective efficacy among his followers who hope to see the independence of Tibet. Further, it illustrates how the narrative schemes of the Dalai Lama function as the cognitive framework for his believers, through which they relate to their refugee status and exercise their nationalist sentiments. However, such centrality aspects of leadership hinder the development of foresightedness among his followers, who struggle to imagine the status of their nation beyond the Dalai Lama. The last section of this chapter combines these two arguments to illustrate how they play a central role in constructing a categorisation norm for being and not being a Tibetan, which eventually developed into a concept of their national traits.



**Figure 1.2. Schematic representation of the interconnected elements of Tibetan ethnic distinctiveness.**

The above figure (Figure 1.2) shows the three elements of Tibetan ethnic distinctiveness (geographical distinctiveness, religious values, and cultural values), along with the faith in the Dalai Lama is a critical factor in constructing a national norm for group membership. However, the established relationship between these factors is not unidirectional. Still, it reflects a cyclic interaction that is one of the central arguments of the present chapter and will become evident in the later sections.

## **Ethnic Distinctiveness**

Here, the term ‘ethnic distinctiveness’ outlines the geographical, cultural, and religious features and symbols the participants strongly identify as belonging to a specific kind of national community (Tibetan national identity in this case). It will become evident in the later sections how identification with such ethnic distinctiveness delivers a two-fold purpose for the continuity of Tibetan nationality. First, it constructs a group norm for the generic characteristics of a Tibetan race. A race that can be further categorised into ‘national traits’ based on the shared emotional response towards ‘the enemy of their nation’. Second, such categorisation provides meaning to the Tibetan community for preserving a nation’s geographical, religious and cultural richness.

### *Geographical distinctiveness*

The central imaginative feature of any nation is its territorial boundary and the geographical vitality it holds for its people (Grosby, 1995; Anderson, 2013). However, a nation’s territorial boundaries and geographical features are not just political divisions but act as homogenous symbols of cultural identity, transhistorical memories, and emotional security. Geographical landmarks such as mountains, rivers, and sacred sites often become repositories of collective memory and national identity that live in the narratives of a nation’s people (Kaplan, 1994). When interacting psychologically, these geographical features transform cultural meaning, representing resilience, unity, and the continuity of national nostalgia (Relph, 1976; Smeekes, 2015). Edward Casey’s (1993) theory of ‘place attachment’ highlights the psychological bonds that individuals and groups form with places; even in the absence of physical proximity, it continues to exist in the form of memory, imagination, and cultural narratives. Such a

phenomenon is particularly prevalent among refugee communities, even those from a distant space and physically separated from their homeland, who maintain an emotional and symbolic connection to their geographical boundaries.

For Tibetan refugees, this attachment extends even to the Tibetans who have never been to their ancestral homeland. One such explanation is found in research on transgenerational memory that suggests cultural narratives and oral histories transmitted across generations allow exiled communities to sustain emotional bonds with the homeland and a desire to continue living with such a narrative mindset (Hirsch, 1997). This phenomenon fulfils a critical psychological function, providing a sense of identity and belonging in exile. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) emphasises that such attachment satisfies higher-order needs like belongingness and safety needs by making individuals see themselves as part of an established order. Additionally, Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (1983) explains how symbolic associations with the homeland's geographical features—such as Tibet's mountains symbolising mythical features—can validate a shared identity among refugees, even when deprived of direct physical experience.

Further, this phenomenon is particularly significant for refugees who have never visited their homeland, as their connection is constructed through collective imagination and cultural transmission. Also, the exiled communities continue reimagining their homeland through symbolic geography, integrating it into rituals, practices, and struggles to return to their rightful land (Malkki, 1995; Peteet, 2005). Such a sense of belongingness serves as a psychological anchor, helping refugees negotiate displacement instability by cultivating a sense of continuity and cultural resilience. The homeland's geographical features, whether experienced in person or

through cultural imagination, are thus essential for exiled communities, preserving their collective identity and offering hope for eventual return or symbolic reclamation.

During our interviews, the geographical features remain an essential prerequisite for the participant's perception of their nation. Their perception of Tibet (both past and present) portrays promising opportunities that their inland holds for them, providing a cogent motivation for the Tibetans to believe and identify with their distant home. Further, such an approach injects emotional significance into its identifiers and pilots them to categorise their 'motherland' (many respondents used the term 'motherland' to refer to Tibet) as distinct. Further, the emotional attachment towards their motherland was clearly evident in their personal, religious and social spaces. During my field visits, I was invited by many participants to their places, and I found that, in most cases, the photo frames of the Himalayas or Potala House were hung around the walls. For instance,

Extract 1. (Observation note: Place - Sarnath, Day - 17 March 2023)

*I was with the gatekeeper in his office. He was finishing some of his work. I noticed a photo frame of a mountain capped in snow placed on the gatekeeper's study table. It clicked with me that I had seen similar photographs before in other participants's homes, too. I asked him:*

*I: I want to ask you one thing, I have seen similar images of mountains and other landscapes depicting mountain ranges, why is it so?*

*P29: Yes, of course. This is one of the many popular mountains of Tibet; it is very beautiful and has a very high altitude. For us, Tibet is the most beautiful country in the world. Of course,*

*nature-wise. For me, especially for me, I connect to my country every day and everytime I watch this photo.*

Similarly, participants' talk of their nation depicted the version of Tibet to which they belonged, to a land filled with natural richness and serenity. For instance, when we asked an eighteen-year-old boy (Participant 4 - P4) who had never been to Tibet about what he knows or feels about Tibet, his reply manifested the geographical significance in the following words:

Extract 2. (P4-Ma-M-18-Out)

*Tibet, Oh! It's too good a place, and its nature is too beautiful! If you go there, you will know that the feeling when you stay in Tibet, the feeling of nature, you will just feel it, like, it is wonderful!*

Like him, the other respondents also appeared enthusiastic in elaborating upon Tibet's physical features. For instance:

Extract 3. (P34-Ma-F-27-Out).

*When you think about why China was so desperate to invade Tibet, you will get the answer about the natural richness of Tibet and its value to the world. Tibet is full of natural minerals, and it is a very big source of water for other Asian countries. If you google it, you will find that Tibet has vast deposits of rare minerals like uranium. That is why Tibet is so special when it comes to natural resources or the geography of my country.*

Such views are also evident from one other participant's voice, who stressed the vitality of water resources that Tibet holds for its neighbouring countries:

Extract 4. (P25-Sa-M-24-Out)

*Tibet has a huge source of water because all the mountains and glaciers are in Tibet, as you see the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Indus, Yangtze, and Tsangpo. All these rivers originated in Tibet, and they feed water to many Asian countries.*

Such pride identification to geographical features provides a sense that even if Tibetans as a refugee population are perceived as weak, their nation is strong, and even if the exiled Tibetan community lacks resources, many countries depend on their true nation for its survival. Many stressed that the geographical characteristics are remarkable and indicated it as a strengthening factor for nationalist sentiments and territorial desirability. This is evident from one participant's (P13) response, who was born in Tibet but migrated to India at the age of nine. Still, while explaining the aesthetics of Tibet, she appeared to be lost in her memories. She recalled its feature with such an intensity that it stipulated the inseparability of her national identity from Tibet's geographical trajectories.

Extract 5. (P13-Ma-F-34-In)

*Tibet, you know, (enthusiastically) Tibet is a vast land with a small population, so many minerals, so many beautiful areas, and a very rich water source because Tibet is the highest in the world. All the snow mountains in Tibet, so all the waters are coming from Tibet, and there are so many holy places. There are so many things, which means very expensive things like we (Tibet) have. We are so rich; Tibet is so rich.*

In imagining or recalling national features, participants often expressed Tibet as their motherland and stratified nationalist sentiments within its geographical boundaries. Such as:

Extract 6. (P33-By-F-31-In)

*I know that I am living in India, but I belong to my motherland, Tibet. I often dream about my motherland and imagine that I am in Tibet in the middle of beautiful mountains, watching the sunrise and breathing fresh air. Tibet's environment is so fresh and filled with pure air. It is a complete package for environmental beauty.*

Although the historical and geographical trajectories were mostly imagined or recalled vividly, still the attributes ascribed by the respondents remain intrinsic to their Tibetan identity. In this regard, respondents' response was somewhat akin to the claims of Dorsh de Voe (1987), who observed that the state of refugees had provided an opportunity for Tibetans to experience themselves as distinctive and observe everything corresponding to their national identity as of unparalleled value.

By enthusiastically emphasising Tibet's vast land, rich mineral resources, abundant water supply, and sacred mountains, the participant repositions Tibet as a place of a rich past and a promising future filled with natural assets. The participants' reaffirmation of values in ethnic attributes of Tibet shifts the focus away from Tibet's political struggles and deprived status in exile to its unique and immutable attributes. By describing Tibet as "*so rich*", the speaker reinterprets their group's characteristics lie in their geographical past and present, coping with refugee narratives that describe them as marginalised or dependent. Such responses reinforce the idea that geographical features possess an intrinsic value that transcends political boundaries or material deprivation. Additionally, such beliefs of the interviewed participants cultivate a shared identity that is both meaningful and empowering, ensuring the preservation of their ethnic identity across generations. Furthermore, the participants often discussed the natural richness of their 'motherland' to stress the resource-based significance of the place for their people and Tibet's geographical importance from the environmental factor.

Such narratives provide an imaginative structure to what kind of national content is under threat and further hold strategic significance to be evaluated by an emotional investment by in-group members and an urgent appeal to the outside world.

### *Religious Values*

A significant aspect of Tibetan religious practices involves creating religious spaces. During my fieldwork in the Pandoh settlement, I noticed that even the houses were scattered and less formally structured; in most houses, spaces were created both inside and outside for religious purposes. Similarly, in the Bylakuppe settlement, I once observed the elder Tibetans chanting in groups while sitting on a bench at a bus stop waiting for a bus. Through their commitment to religion, they created a temporary space for praying marked by imaginary boundaries which other local people standing nearby hesitated to enter. These locals maintained silence and required distance, respecting those refugees' religious determination. Such phenomena become even more vivid in one of the extracts from my filed notes.

Extract 7. (Observation note: Place - Pandoh, Day - 25 March 2019)

*Walking during the afternoon to have lunch with a participant, I noticed a middle-aged woman turning a hand held prayer wheel outside her home. The wheel was painted in a bright red shade and golden colour. She was spinning the wheel clockwise, murmuring mantras softly, and her lips were barely moving.*

Apart from creating religious space and interacting in a detached manner from their surroundings, participants' reference to religion also implies homogeneity of practice. Still, assertions on homogenous religious values are made to accentuate distinctiveness to allow the

construction of uniform Tibetan ethnic identity. Furthermore, it is essential to understand participants' expression of their religious values beyond simply the articulation of belief structure or an attempt to reinstate ethnic purity. Their chosen version of religious virtues is seminal in constructing a distinct group impression due to its non-violence policies, which separate their identity from the rest of the world; this world believes in conquest and competition. Such intentions are evident in our conversation with a 57 years political representative (P5) who answered our question about exercising religion as a way for experiencing Tibetanness:

Extract 8. (P5-Ma-M-57-Out)

*Ok, our religion [short pause] is Buddhism. In our religion, they say peace or Shanthi (peace) [a bit loudly]. First of all, God Buddha told ahimsa (non-violence) to be param dharam (supreme duty). Isn't it? People should do ahimsa, not himsa (violence). In our religion, this is more. Nobody should think of harm to anyone; why should I do harm if anyone thinks of any harm? We should do good for them. Like this, their evil/badness will be over. It is said that if you can't do good for anyone, don't harm anyone either! Mingle with everyone. If there is any living thing, for example, an earthworm, if it lies on the way, take it to the soil, keep it where it should be; if we do like that, someone will reach their world. Here, there should not be any sadness, even for an insect. In our mind, this is the thing. There should be helping behaviour towards everyone. Give food to those in need. It is something big. If we want to do pooja (prayer), all these things should be there.*

Similarly, other respondents also expressed their religious values as non-violent, altruistic, and aiming to attain spiritual enlightenment through service to all those who breathe. Like:

Extract 9. (P17-Sa-M-27-Out)

*Our religion has this kind of universal compassion for every human, every section, that concept of love and compassion that is quite different from other religions. For instance, our religious compassion is not only confined to humans but shares the same feeling for all living beings, even for insects, even for the individuals who are residing outside the planet Earth. We consider there are many galaxies, so there are many beings up there, so we in a way ascend a love and compassion, whatever it is, to the entire central beings, so that kind of Bodhicitta (altruism) we practice in our religion. The practice of such a kind of Bodhicitta is what differentiates us both as Tibetans and as Tibetan Buddhists from other communities.*

The participant's strong belief here signifies an intention to uphold the native aspects of their religious identity and protect it from the influences of change in an exiled land. Further, it constructs an image of a peace-oriented nation that has been a victim of the unjust motives of outsiders. It indicates the potentiality of still being the priest in the priest-patronage relationship by sharing Tibetan virtues with outsiders, nevertheless, for the same reason, invoking sentiments not to let the priest die in the hands of modern war affairs.

Moreover, many respondents acknowledged traditional and cultural diversities among Tibetans. For instance, one participant from the Tibetan Social Service Society. Bylakuppe Shares a similar view:

Extract 10. (P3-By-M-47-In)

*Tibet as a nation, from our side we feel that it is mostly a Buddhist nation. There are minorities such as Muslims as well as Christians are also there, but the maximum is Buddhism".*

However, such statements were followed mainly by claims of commonness to represent a more integrated and unified version of Tibetan nationalism.

Extract 11. (P11-Ma-M-20-Out)

*Though we might seem to have four traditions, we are one (emphasises)! We come from Lord Buddha; we might take different paths, but the goal is one!*

Hitherto, interviewees' responses sound concerned with representing national identity in ways that acknowledge commonality without compromising with subgroup differences. Respondents repeatedly used congruency of the objective to free Tibet to counterpoise the heterogeneity of practices. Thus, the emerging pattern of Tibetan response points to shared spiritual roots and common purpose as a narrative tool for preserving ethnic purity and constructing a commonality of identification. Their identification with the narratives of shared religious virtues, cultural values (discussed in the next section), and strong association with a motherland strengthen their sense of Tibetan 'ethine'.

### *Cultural Values*

Our quest in these sections only partially focuses on defining 'Tibetan-ness' or addressing 'who are Tibetans'. Beyond such rudimentary approaches, addressing what aspects of cultural and religious attributes remain akin to our participants' thought processes in exile is potent, too. In the absence of historical and ancestral proximity, both the repeats and misses in the participants' viewpoints while discussing cultural values highlight the active impressions of their identity available for sourcing meaning and comparison for 'Tibetan-ness' in exile. For instance, a female

participant who runs a small business in the Rewalsar area of the Mandi district defines Tibetan culture as:

Extract 12. (P34-Sa-M-24-Out)

*If I had to describe Tibetan culture, I would say that the most important thing about Tibetan culture is its native language. Tibetan culture also includes traditional Tibetan dress and eating of staple Tibetan food. For me, Tibetan culture also includes paying your gratitude to the god for this life and treating people with respect and compassion.*

Stressing on dressing style and food culture remains the initial point in the participants' responses for underlining the comparative aspects of their cultural values, which may strike customary to anyone. However, here, the term 'comparative' implies the participants' frequent comparisons with Indian culture (immediate surroundings) to define the characteristics of their cultural distinctiveness. When asked, "Tell us something about yourself", after providing information about his birthplace and occupation, one participant (P5) eventually asked us, "What else do you want to know, Tibetan culture?" After affirmation, he continued:

Extract 13. (P5-Ma-M-57-Out)

*Ok [thinking and speaking simultaneously], Tibetan culture and traditional dress are there. It's "chuba", isn't it? Wear it like this [make a gesture of dressing]. For food, Momos, Chowmein, Thupka, Thimmu (popular Tibetan food). We eat Samba and [unclear] Chamba or Makkhan (butter) in Hindi, Sattu (Gram flour), as well as butter. These things, we eat more with tea and namkeen. In Tibet, we have this more. Those people who live in India, those who belong to us, eat mostly Indian culture food.*

Furthermore, I noticed the dietary significance in Tibetan culture during my fieldwork on the Uprising Day:

Extract 14. (Observation note: Place - Sarnath, Day -10 March 2023)

*While going through the menu in the CIHTS's canteen today, I noticed a different section for proper Tibetan cuisine, including butter tea. Now, I asked the canteen receptionist.*

*I: You have separate section for Tibetan food?*

*R: yes. This is our food, Tibetan food! Especially for Tibetan people, they prefer their food and not other food.*

*Even in Bylakuppe and Pandoh, every time I visited someone's home, I was offered butter tea and many times I had thukpa (one of the staple foods of Tibet) for lunch with my gatekeeper back in Bylakuppe.*

While explaining the peculiarities of Tibetan culture, the participants also expressed concerns about the challenges of maintaining their customary way of life in an exiled land. Although the sentiments are intrinsic to indigeneity, inevitable lifestyle changes are perceived as compromises with their ethnic identity.

Another significant aspect of the analysis is how they perceive their cultural paradigm originating from religious virtues. Many retrospectively defined their religious philosophy to define their Tibetan culture from ideological and behavioural standpoints corresponding to their religious doctrines. A similar schematic framework facilitates the guidelines of cultural norms, which further help determine their characteristics through social behaviour. For instance, in answering

the question, "What do you think of the role of religion in the construction of Tibetan identity?"

The participant explains;

Extract 15. (P6-My-M-37-In)

*I think Tibetan culture is based on the Buddhist religion: love and compassion. Even though there is some misbehaviour, generally speaking, Tibetans are very honest. Even in business things, they never cheat anyone, and that comes because of religion. Buddhist religion has a big role in our culture: respect for elders, love for younger ones, and help to poor people. All this comes because of our religion. So, religion has a major role in our Tibetan culture.*

However, such fixation on religion may be due to the participant's affiliation, as he is a Rinpoche (spiritual teacher) devoted to teaching Buddhist Philosophy worldwide. Still, these claims stand meaningful in understanding the Tibetans' cultural mindset as similar opinions are held by many other participants, too. For example, a PhD student from CIHTS shares a similar claim:

Extract 16. (P29-Sa-M-33-Out)

*The most important thing is Tibet's kindness and compassion, which are fundamentally deep-rooted in Tibet's culture. Fundamentally, our compassion and non-violence, whatever it is, originates from our religion and, in a way, is maintained as our culture and tradition, which has been practised as cultural values for thousands of years.*

Another comparison they draw to define their cultural distinctiveness is the morality-driven group consciousness shaping their social structure. The concepts of liberty, freedom, and gender equality remain prominent factors in their comparisons. Nevertheless, associating these concepts with their sense of 'distinctiveness' emerges from comparison with the Indian social system but

not the West. In highlighting the openness of their cultural setting concerning gender stereotypes, a female respondent expresses;

Extract 17. (P13-Ma-F-34-In)

*In our Tibetan culture, women have so much freedom. They are equal, with no discrimination. If the husband is not good, she can divorce and go to another husband. Small social issue, so much freedom.*

Another female participant expressed a similar opinion by emphasising the role of gender in their culture in regulating work-life balance.

Extract 18. (P2-Ma-F-34-Out)

*Your ladies are there, staying at home only and cooking food for your husband! It's not like that in our culture. In our Tibetan culture, ladies walk shoulder to shoulder with their husbands.*

These two excerpts highlight the psychological mechanism of social comparison and illustrate how the participant constructs her culturally guided gender identity in contrast to other groups. Her view that “*In our Tibetan culture, ladies walk shoulder to shoulder with their husbands,*” emphasises the unbiased nature of gender roles within Tibetan culture. For deriving meaning in a comparative context, she positioned her cultural gender values as a positive distinction from the interviewer’s culture. Such positive distinctions also act as countering stereotypes about traditional gender norms, which China blamed on being suppressive. Further, the critical opinion towards the out-group, expressed in her statement, “*Your ladies are there, like staying at home only and cooking food for your husband,*” reflects a hierarchical evaluation, portraying Tibetan culture as progressive and non-discriminatory in terms of gender roles. Furthermore, emphasis

on gender equality helps affirm the distinctiveness of Tibetan ethnic identity, as even if it is shaped by traditional values, it still holds lessons for modern universal values. Additionally, such a positive comparison provides a source of pride to assert in-group superiority and celebrate collective identity. Such sentiments are reflected in one of the participants' voice as:

Extract 19. (P27-Sa-M-25-Out)

*Tibetan culture is very rich, and it is a gem for this world. If it gets extinguished, then it's a very serious loss for this world.*

Interestingly, while the male participants emphasised love and compassion to highlight the essence of their cultural values, the female participants identified more strongly with the aspects of gender roles encrypted in Tibetan cultural values. Further, their narrations of cultural values entail everything in contrast to what China blames the Tibetans for, such as China claiming Tibetan culture to be feudal and conservative. At the same time, our participants tried to prove otherwise by offering counter-narratives of gender equality, freedom, and compassion. Surprisingly, no participant mentioned the native artwork, such as songs, paintings or literature, while discussing Tibetan culture.

Understanding such features of their culture is relevant because when they claim to be different from out-group members (especially China and India) regarding religious and cultural aspects, they mean such attributes to draw the line between them and the rest. Similarly, when they appeal to the urgency of saving Tibetan culture from the Chinese authorities, they mean such features should be protected. Further, these values establish the characteristics of their national trait and set a paradigm for their value-oriented response to Chinese atrocities.

## **Faith in the Dalai Lama**

Another significant factor that contributes to the legitimacy of a group's status is a national leader's ability to maintain social order and lead social transformations in ways that strengthen a collective identity and make certain group cohesion. Leadership theories, including transformational (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and charismatic leadership theories (Tucker, 1968; House & Howell, 1992), are crucial to understanding the dynamics of centralised leadership, where a single leader receives unconditional acceptance. Leaders can shape national discourse in such contexts by embodying coherent ideologies, re-integrating authority structure, and directing societal transformation. Such centralised power enables leaders to regulate refugee politics effectively by developing structures that address immediate needs while advocating for international recognition. Leadership strategies become more crucial in diasporic situations where they serve as an instrumental apparatus for the continuity of social order in stateless communities, compensating for the absence of a territorial nation-state. According to Bass and Riggio's (2006) transformational leadership theory, effective leaders inspire followers by communicating a compelling vision, encouraging intellectual stimulation, and addressing individual and collective needs. The Dalai Lama exemplifies this model by advancing a vision of a democratic "Free Tibet" rooted in nonviolence and Buddhist principles. His leadership has unified the Tibetan diaspora by providing a shared goal and a moral and cultural cognitive framework that transformed geographical and political boundaries into a nation-in-exile. Further, I found the symbolic presence of the Dalai Lama was observed in every nook and corner of the Tibetan culture during my fieldwork. Even on Uprising Day 2023, a big cut of the Dalai Lama was placed in the middle of the Two Lions temple, where his message on the occasion of the event was supposed to be read. All the Tibetans were sitting around his cut-out.

Such arrangements can also be seen as an effort to make the symbolic presence of the Dalai Lama omnipresent and to condition the minds of his devotees to perceive every political, social or religious event in connection with the Dalai Lama's presence. Similarly:

Extract 20. (Observation note: Place - Sarnath, Day - 2 April 2023)

*Most probably this is the last day of my fieldwork and I am certain that I haven't witnessed a single incident in which the Dalai Lama's symbolic presence (either through his photos, sculptures or books) was absent. Like today itself, my gatekeeper who has become a good friend has gifted me 'Freedom in Exile', a book written by the Dalai Lama, an envelope-size photo of the Dalai Lama and a Tibetan flag.*

Unconditional faith in the Dalai Lama has immensely shaped the everyday lives and social movements of Tibetan refugees, as well as the political strategy of the diaspora. Such intensive emotion is explicitly reflected in one interviewee's expression of determination towards the Dalai Lama:

Extract 21. (P23-Sa-M-28-Out)

*The Dalai Lama means everything to me. If you ask me 'what can you do for your Dalai Lama and what can you do for your Tibet?'. The answer is very straightforward and simple: I can do everything for my country, I can do everything for my guru, my Dalai Lama, and I can even take my life for him because he is the one who keeps us alive. It is only because of him, his knowledge, and his presence we are living here in India. Even if it was not about him I don't think that Tibetans will be in India or any other part of the world. I think most Tibetans, including those who are living in Tibet, will say that it is because of our guru, the Dalai Lama we*

*are still alive and we are able to communicate or able to spread our traditions, our culture, and our values to the world. It is all possible because of him.*

His decision to devolve political authority in 2011, transferring formal governance to an elected Sikyong (prime minister), as a step towards democratisation of the exiled government, reflects his adaptive strategies to meet the ethical paradigms of the modern political system (Choedup, 2018). This transition corresponds directly to his adaptive leadership—a framework posited by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009)—as he prepares the Tibetan community to sustain its struggle amid generational and geopolitical shifts. However, despite this transition, the Dalai Lama’s symbolic authority remains a unifying spiritual as well as political force responsible for the stability within the diaspora’s political affairs and prevention of consent dissolution among the Tibetan refugees.

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama represents a distinct symbolic combination of a spiritual and political leader who inspires unquestionable trust, manifesting in everyday communal practices, decision-making, and preserving collective goals. Such absolute belief in his guidance ensures active participation in social movements for Tibetan autonomy by following the instructions of the Dalai Lama. For instance, his emphasis on nonviolence and diplomacy influences the refugees’ approaches to political negotiation schemes, shaping political campaigns and framing the Tibetan cause on international platforms. Similarly, his leadership directly impacts the principles of refugee settlements, education policies for the refugees, and collective rituals, internalising his vision into daily life practices. The establishment of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) exemplifies this influence, as it reflects his strategic balance of traditional values with modern governance, ensuring institutional resilience amid the challenges of statelessness. Such an influencing role can also be understood through the lens of charismatic

leadership theory (Tucker, 1968; House & Howell, 1992), which suggests that a leader's personal qualities and symbolic representation create a sense of legitimacy that can change traditional bureaucratic systems and collective behaviours.

Psychologically, charismatic leadership holds transformative power in shaping individuals' psychological states, especially prevalent in communities experiencing displacement and trauma. The Dalai Lama's leadership style, which includes moral authority, empathy, and spiritual guidance, is particularly admirable for the Tibetan refugee population. By virtue of their ability to inspire unquestionable support and narrate a compelling vision, charismatic leaders can encourage community resilience, reduce confusion, resolve in-group conflicts and promote social cohesion within marginalised groups (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). The Dalai Lama's leadership has been instrumental in reducing the psychological effects of displacement among Tibetan refugees, as his message of compassion and hope offers emotional support in situations of hardships and distress (Bentz, 2012; Hussain & Bhusan, 2013). In addition to individual mental support, his leadership is crucial in maintaining group harmony and nationalist feelings within the dispersed Tibetan refugee community. The Tibetan refugees are settled in different parts of India and worldwide. As a result, they often experience disintegration due to differences in cultural backgrounds and social divisions based on distinct legal systems. Thus, charismatic leaders like the Dalai Lama provide a unifying force, addressing conflicts of interest by offering a common identity and shared purpose (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). It helps refugees transcend their immediate trauma by focusing on the collective goal of cultural preservation and non-violent resistance. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama's approach emphasises the religious values of Tibetan tradition that involve compassion, non-violence, forgiveness, mutual respect, and

principles of truth. Such leadership style has proved instrumental in resolving conflicts and promoting harmony within and outside the community (Tsujimura, 2015).

The Dalai Lama's leadership also reflects the adaptive leadership style proposed by Heifetz and Linsky (2014), which focuses on the capacity of leaders to mobilise communities in administering multifaceted challenges. For instance, by transitioning Tibetan governance from a monarchical to a democratic set-up, the Dalai Lama demonstrated adaptive leadership. Such political transformation has prepared the Tibetan diasporic population with the institutional tools required to sustain their movement in the face of territorial uncertainties and generational changes. His adaptability skills have fueled longevity in the Tibetan cause and have gathered international appreciation. One notable example of this influence is the Tibetan Freedom Movement, which operates as an international scheme and advocates for Tibetan self-determination through a middle-way approach. His advocacy for the middle-way approach became a reason for participants to envision the freedom of Tibet in a diplomatic way. For instance:

Extract 22. (P29-Sa-M-33-Out)

*A voice that comes to our mind when we think about a middle-way approach is that it is proposed by His Holiness, and we are in everything that he guides.*

Another participant added a new layer of understanding of how the leadership factor is responsible for ensuring support from the Tibetan refugees for a middle-way approach as the right negotiation strategy for Tibet's cause:

Extract 23. (P18-Sa-M-26-Out)

*As of now my belief in the middle-way approach is so sure because it is given by His Holiness Dalai Lama Ji, and he must have put a very serious thought on it. I believe that because His Holiness said that we cannot talk to China if we demand freedom and that the middle way is the only way to get in touch with China. His Holiness must have said this only after a very serious thought, about which we people cannot have any opinion because we people have not reflected on it that seriously. To add further, we don't have that much knowledge either, but I feel that something good is happening with us through the middle-way approach, and thus, it is necessary to follow it.*

Further, The Dalai Lama's commitment to nonviolent principles, rooted in Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and Buddhist teachings, has been instrumental in shaping the moral principles of political and social movements for the Tibetan cause (Gayley, 2018). Refugees actively participate in protests, petitions, and campaigns that align with his determination for peaceful resistance, such as the 2008 global protests during the Beijing Olympics, where Tibetan exiles drew international attention to their plight without resorting to violence (Smith, 2010). This approach reinforces the movement's moral standards and appeals to global audiences, enhancing diplomatic efforts to garner support from foreign governments and organisations.

Social identity theories, apart from Tajfel and Turner's foundational work, such as the self-categorisation theory by Hogg and Turner (1987), further help us understand the relationship between leadership and group identity. Self-categorisation theory states that leaders are perceived as prototypical representatives of the group's values and norms. The Dalai Lama's embodiment of Tibetan religious and cultural ideals has made him the sole and true representative of true Tibet, and his presence has evolved as a symbol of purity and authenticity that narrates the greatness of Tibet's past. This prototypicality guaranteed that his leadership was viewed as

legitimate and aligned with the nation's identity, thus providing a meaningful framework for the distinctiveness of Tibetan culture in exile.

So far, our analysis highlights the physical and psychological attributes of 'Tibetan-ness' that are considered enduring and remain sustainable over time. The legitimacy of such group status also depends on leadership instrumentality influencing social order in a community and managing the dynamics of social changes (such as changing the concept of Tibet from a monarchical setup to a democratic nation-state) for the collective good. Further, faith and hope are two factors that moderate a nation's leadership instrumentality and coherent identification with the available definition and ideology for a nation. In this sense, addressing the role of His Holiness Dalai Lama becomes essential for understanding the cognitive and affective orientation of the participants' belief structure corresponding to their national movement. Thus, the present section explores how our participants negotiate their faith in His Holiness Dalai Lama to identify with a spectrum of beliefs, hopes, and moral strategies for the continuity of their nationalist commitments.

During the conversations, participants internalise the symbolic presence of His Holiness Dalai Lama as a 'living god', a god whose presence has not merely evolved as Buddha's reincarnation but also an empathetic leader, responsible for injecting meaning and sustaining welfare in the life of Tibetans worldwide. While answering, a participant's (P8) explanation indicates the same in the following words:

Extract 24. (P8-By-F-29-In)

*Obviously, the majority of Tibetans project His Holiness as a living God. In a way, he is a human being, but we Tibetans believe, we Tibetans have some kind of thought that he is a living Buddha or Living God. And in practice, he has done some extraordinary things.*

Another participant shared similar dynamics and regarded His Holiness Dalai Lama as the saviour of their diasporic community and evaluated his group status as overwhelmingly dependent on the mercy of His Holiness for the survival of Tibetan refugees in exile.

Extract 25. (P5-Ma-M-57-Out)

*Our spiritual leader, Dalai Lama Ji, is our Tibetan community's guru. Isn't it? Everything is him, Guruji; he is our spiritual leader. With His mercy, we live in India, seeking shelter, food, and drinking water. On his mercy, Isn't it?*

However, His Holiness's approaches not only foster the political and economic dimensions of an exiled community, but his symbolic presence bridges the religious continuity between Tibetans under China and Tibet in exile. Thus, on the one hand, participants express how China's prohibition policy on worshipping His Holiness in Tibet brings grief in Tibetan life; on the other hand, such bans remain a significant factor in their escaping to India.

Extract 26. (P13-Ma-F-34-In)

*Yes, so many people came to India because they wanted to study and learn the teachings of the Dalai Lama. There are so many monks and lamas in Tibet, and they don't get the teachings of the Dalai Lama. It is not that much not good there for studying, so many people are coming to India to study in Karnataka and other monasteries. They want to study Buddhism and religion under the Dalai Lama.*

Elaborating on such feelings, the exiled community serves as a space for newly arrived refugees to rediscover their sense of nationhood through exercising religious and cultural freedom under the symbolic presence of His Holiness. These motivational drives are seminal in addressing the leadership influences in developing feelings of solidarity and connectedness among a dispersed population. For instance, a participant's (P10) extra effort to say '*mostly importantly*' in the following extract provides perspective to such arguments.

Extract 27. (P10-By-F-29-In)

*We have a common language, religion, and culture; most importantly, our faith in the Dalai Lama connects us as Tibetans.*

One participant identified another perspective while explaining his faith in the leadership strategy of His Holiness for gaining Tibet's solution. The subsequent response highlights a transference of psychological phenomena where the participant's strong identification with a national character (His Holiness Dalai Lama) transforms into an unquestionable faith associated with the policies adopted by such characters to benefit the in-group status.

Extract 28. (P3-By-M-47-In)

*[A slight pause] I am sure we can achieve this slowly and steadily because China is a populist country with the largest population in the world. Right now, they are a powerful country, and Tibet is a small country. Through truth and non-violence, just like Gandhi ji has done for India, His Holiness is doing the same things. This way I think we can get our own country. For example, through the middle way, we are having a dialogue between China, Tibet and India, and we can get our country back within a few years...I hope so [sighs].*

Such brief extracts provide a definitive account of the interviewees' faith and expectations from His Holiness. Such expectations correspond to a two-fold dimension: first, they position their reference to the godly persona (Buddha's reincarnation) while explaining the relevance of His Holiness regarding cultural and religious survival, and second, by comparing his leadership skill to a human while imagining the future of Tibet from a socio-political perspective. Thus, it makes respondents perceive the dynamics of His Holiness's leadership policies as in the best interest of their nation's past, present, and future. One participant (P8) accepted the success of Tibet's social movement by being obedient to the values of His Holiness's leadership style.

Extract 29. (P8-By-F-29-In)

*For our younger generation, we wanted to protest, but for our religion, our His Holiness, we mainly looked at him as our religious person. So his words, non-violence mainly, have all become our habit. We have to follow, and we happily follow that non-violence and all. Even though we wanted to shout, we happily followed that kind of attitude. However, on the one hand, such faith remains seminal for the moral convictions of our participants, determining the responsibilities and solidarities among group members for the nation's welfare and bringing stability to group status. Conversely, it acts as a dependency-driven vulnerability that limits the participants' foresightedness and causes insecurity concerning Tibet after the 14th Dalai Lama. For instance, a young Tibetan boy shared feelings, "Guru ji's life has to be longer. There should not be any disease. We need to take care of him. If he gets any disease, we will all be sad. If we see his healthy face, we feel good. We feel happy from our hearts. We feel good."*

## National Trait

Now, addressing the question, “Whom Tibetans considered Tibetan” becomes more potent to understand their identification process at an intra-group level. A critical opinion was expressed by one of the female PhD scholars from the CIHTS who provides a clear distinction between whom Tibetans considered Tibetans, in the following words:

Extract 30. (P16-Sa-F-27-Out)

*Without our culture, without our language, we are not Tibetans. If I don't speak Tibetan, if I don't care about my culture, then I am not a Tibetan. I feel that way. So, if I meet you somewhere else, then how would you say that I am a Tibetan if I don't even speak the Tibetan language? However, I can say I am Tibetan by blood, but I don't think that makes much sense if I don't have my own language. If we don't have our own culture, then I don't have anything, and I cannot say that I have any identity at all.*

The above-expressed views point out the inflexibility with which the participant has defined her national identity and who she considers truly Tibetan, which is an uncompromising negotiation. The statement “*Without our culture, without our language, we are not Tibetans*” reflects the belief that being Tibetan is not just about ancestry but also about actively practising the Tibetan culture and speaking the language. Such an attitude shows a fixed trait of valuing cultural preservation and a strong sense of national identity. The line “*If I don't speak Tibetan, I cannot say that I have any identity at all*” further indicates the language factor as a qualifying criterion for a genuine Tibetan identity, revealing a consistent trait of desire for connecting to the traditional roots. Similarly, the remark, “*I can say I am Tibetan by blood, but I don't think that makes much sense*”, suggests that kinship alone is insufficient without cultural and linguistic

practices. Such a fixed mindset reflects personality traits like pride in heritage, inclination towards ethnic purity, and a sense of responsibility toward preserving the community's cultural and traditional values. Further, such statements suggest that the participant considers linguistic and cultural attributes necessary for being recognised as truly Tibetan.

Further, when I asked a 29-year-old female, “What makes you think you are a Tibetan,” she precisely understood ‘Tibetan-ness’ as:-

Extract 31. (P10-By-F-29-In)

*We have our own culture, our own history, our ancestors, and our own language. Those who follow these things will be considered Tibetan.*

The participant's understanding of Tibetans reflects a mental framework essential in defining the national personality traits of Tibetan refugees in exile. By fixating on culture, history, ancestors, and language as core markers of “Tibetan-ness”, she establishes a clear set of national norms that guide group membership for who can be considered a “true Tibetan.” It also shares similarities with the concept of “collective identity,” where group members reinforce shared values and narratives to validate the distinctiveness of their group identity and take pride in such distinctiveness (Castells, 1997).

She further expresses:

Extract 32. (P10-By-F-29-In)

*Physical appearance is a different thing. The characteristics of people who are humble, down to earth, and compassionate for others differentiate Tibetans from others.*

Another participant shares the same opinion and describes compassion as one of the fundamental characteristics of the Tibetan identity:

Extract 33. (P29-Sa-M-33-Out)

*It doesn't matter what religious sects of Tibetan Buddhism we belong to, but we are Tibetans to say this: there is one identity that is ours that fundamentally is compassion and non-violence, and emotions of kindness are our identity.*

Such a belief system was reflected in one of the incidents that I observed during the fieldwork:

Extract 34. (Observation note: Place - Pandoh, Day - 3 March 2019)

*After the interview, the participant (P2) asked me to stay for some snacks. I was attending to a call while she was making the snacks. A spider fell in one of the utensils. She carefully took the spider in her hand and placed it in a safer place. I asked:*

*I: Do you like spiders?*

*P: Yes, sure. It is my blood to love everyone, even an insect or a beast. People know us for this kindness.*

Further, in their defining style and imagining nation, the participants still submit to the idea of Tibet that existed before foreign interventions: Tibet beyond materialism and within spirituality. It holds two implications; on the one hand, such individual belief structures allow them to imagine the national features most available for identification. On the other hand, it validates the essentials of normative fit in further assuming the national traits of its citizens. For instance, an India-born 47-year-old Tibetan male perceived Tibet through its primitive roots when asked, “As

you said, Tibet is a kind of imaginary nation for you because you have not seen it, but you have seen the representations of Tibet. So, how do you feel about Tibet as your nation”?

Extract 35. (P3-By-M-47-In)

*Yeah, Tibet as a nation is very peaceful, loving and very peaceful (thinks loudly), and nature, everything; all the people are very kind-hearted. They believe in their religion, and they want to be kind to every living being, not only towards human beings. I observe that there is no harm to each other. Actually, there are other religions in Tibet, but they still live together harmoniously. There is no political pressure or anything; it is very peaceful and very loving.*

Notably, the participant was born and raised in India and has yet to visit Tibet. Still, his views about Tibet as a nation and the shared traits of its citizens show an unwavering belief. Other respondents also recognised traits such as humbleness, compassion, altruism and non-greedy as the essentials of Tibetan personality. Moreover, they agreed that these traits also define their social system, such as, *“In our politics, there is no greed and all...nothing like that”*.

Given the mentioned circumstances, it would be interesting to understand how these commoners who identify strongly with their national traits perceive a threat (China) to their distinctiveness and existence through the discussed value window.

## **Summary**

This chapter discusses the three main themes central to the present thesis’s findings. Further, the chapter provides an analytical overview of the first defining theme, ‘*ethnic distinctiveness*’, which comprises three subthemes: ‘*geographical distinctiveness*’, ‘*religious values*’ and ‘*cultural values*’. This part discusses how identifying with the geographical richness, doctrines of

Buddhism, and cultural values that teach compassion is critical in maintaining their distinct group identity. The chapter then discusses the second theme, *'faith in the Dalai Lama'* - another determining factor that shapes how Tibetan refugees think of themselves and their existence in exile and derive strength from their ethnic identification process. The final theme of the present chapter is *'national traits'*, which discusses how identification with ethnic aspects of traditional Tibet constructs a national norm for defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria for group membership. Further, this theme shows that, over time, it has become a national trait symbolic of what *'true Tibetans'* are supposed to be. The chapter concludes that all the factors discussed together play a critical role in shaping the behavioural attitudes with which the Tibetan refugees negotiate their social and political realities.