

An Identity in Flux? The Case of Tibetan Muslims Residing in Kashmir

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This is one of the field essays penned down by the Visual Storyboard team of Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), O.P. Jindal Global University, working in Kashmir for a manuscript project focusing on new subaltern voices of communities from the valley. Previous studies from this project have focused on the lives-livelihoods of the Sheikhs (Watal) Community, Hanjis (Fishing Folk), to name a few. This essay highlights observations made in the team's interviews with Kashmiri Muslim Tibetans residing in different urban areas of Srinagar.

Kashmir has been known for its cultural and ethnic diversity, despite being projected by the radical political right as a state with a homogeneously perceived Muslim population. It is home to many religious and ethnic communities amongst which are different cultural minorities residing in the valley, across different urban and rural areas. A recent

manuscript work in progress discusses their profile, livelihood transitions, and more. Amongst one of these lesser-known cultural minority groups is the Tibetan Muslim community.

In 1959, People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China launched an offensive against Tibet and claimed that it was a part of mainland China. The Tibetan defensive was brutally crushed by the PLA forcing the spiritual and temporal head of state, Dalai Lama to seek refuge in India. With him, many Tibetans crossed over to neighbouring countries like India, Nepal and Bhutan.

In India, Tibetan refugees live in various states, including Karnataka which is home to the largest number of Tibetan refugees in the country followed by Himachal Pradesh, as per government data. A small community of Muslim Tibetans also arrived in the valley of Kashmir. The arrival of Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir marked what they call as the “back to home” process.



Tibetan Public School. Photo: Khalid Wasim

The Tibetan Muslims believe that their ancestors were traders who used to take goods from Kashmir to Tibet and later settled there. Thus, when they arrived in Kashmir in the late 1950's, it felt like coming back home for some.

Muzaffar Ahmad Kaloo, one of the respondents and current spokesperson of the community, says:

“We were called as Khajur in Tibet meaning Kashmiris, our ancestors were traders who migrated to Tibet for trade”.

There are different accounts surrounding the arrival of Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir. Muzaffar maintains that they arrived in Kashmir by choice:

“We asked the Chinese government to let us migrate to India, where we were given a choice of settling in any part of India but we chose Kashmir as we originally belonged to this place.”

Muzzambil Kaloo* contests this statement, he said:

“My uncle was jailed, our family was forced to migrate. He (uncle) died in the Chinese Prison,” although most of them maintained that it was the elders of the community who asked to be settled in Kashmir.

Farhan Hameed* added:

“Our elders chose to settle here as Kashmir was a Muslim majority state.”

According to the senior members of the community around 50-60 families migrated to Kashmir.

Sense of belonging

When the Tibetan Muslims arrived in Kashmir Valley in the late 1950's, they were given temporary arrangements in the form of tents at Eidgah, Srinagar and in local

mosques by the Kashmiri Muslims living in the neighbourhood near Eidgah. Mohammed Farroq*, who had accompanied his parents as a six-year-old boy, remembers:

“For weeks, it was the locals from nearby areas who brought food and water for us. Although we were different from them in looks but shared the same religious faith and had Kashmiri surnames which worked in our favour.”



Masjid-e-Hijrat. Photo: Khalid Wasim

It was during the tenure of Gulam Mohammed Bakshi-led government that separate buildings were constructed for the settlement of Tibetan Muslims in front of Eidgah, Srinagar. Mohammed Mustafa*, who runs a tailoring shop on the ground floor of a Tibetan settlement in Eidgah, says:

“Bakshi saheb was very kind to our community. Not only did he provide shelter for us but allowed some of the Tibetan men to be construction workers for multiple government projects during his time.”

Over some time, the Tibetan settlement at Eidgah became one of the important landmarks in Srinagar. It was in the 1980s that the state government allotted land for a new Tibetan colony in the Hawal area of Srinagar. So at present Tibetan Muslims live at Eidgah as well as at Hawal.

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As some call themselves ethnic Kashmiris, most of them still like to be identified as Tibetan Kashmiri Muslims, carrying a dual-identity.

“My ancestors were from Kashmir and Tibet, I have blood of both nations in my body as such I identify as a Tibetan and a Kashmiri,” Ansar Ahmed* said, when asked about his identity.

The Tibetan Muslims have a strong sense of belonging which has been shaped through the ages. Even though the community has tried to maintain their distinct cultural practices and heritage, there has been an impact of Kashmiri culture on the members, particularly the younger generation.

“Earlier we used to wear Chuba, that was our cultural dress but now we wear the same clothes that the Kashmiris wear,” added Jamil Ahmed*.

The influence of Kashmir can be seen not only in the dresses but the cuisine.

“Earlier we used to eat the local Tibetan diet but now we eat what Kashmiris eat,” said an elderly person.

Similarly, Omar Ahmed* added:

“On some occasions like Eid we make food like Thupka at home.”

Even there is an adaptation of traditional Kashmiri cuisine *wazwan* during the marriage parties. This loss of culture is worrisome for the elderly generation. They believe that the younger generation of the community is influenced by Western culture at the expense of their culture. Ghulam Mustafa* added:

“There is no harm in evolving with modern times but it should not come at the expense of our own culture.”

Religion is an important part of the community’s lifestyle and identity. It is one of the common threads they share with the majority Kashmiri population. They take part in religious festivals as the other Kashmiri communities take part.

“We celebrate all the festivals of Muslims like Eid,” added Mohammed Tahir*.

In the new Tibetan colony of Hawal, the community has a separate masjid, which also serves as a community centre. Interestingly this mosque is named Masjid-i-Hijrat, where the word *Hijrat* (migration) in Islamic history is related to migration for a religious cause.

Most of the members of the community are engaged in trade and commerce. They own business establishments ranging from restaurants, embroidery shops and local grocery shops. Mohammed Gul* pointed out that:

“Around 70% of our community members are in the business of tila-sozi (silver embroidery) of pharens and shawls and a very small number of us run the Tibetan restaurants. But there is stereotyping from Kashmiris that we all run momo shops.”

Even though the community has been relatively successful in integrating itself into the broader Kashmiri economy, there are certain areas where they have been neglected, particularly the government sector. Even though they call themselves citizens of India they face a lot of difficulties in obtaining the state-subject (domicile) certificate which was an important document to apply for government jobs in pre-2019 Jammu and Kashmir.



At present Tibetan Muslims live at Eidgah as well as at Hawal. Photo: Khalid Wasim

Although these Tibetan Muslims have documents like voter ID and Aadhaar, there are challenges surrounding their issue of identity and recognition.

“Many people in our community have a state subject certificate, but it is difficult to make bureaucrats understand that we are also citizens of India, therefore we prefer getting these certificates, although we have all other identification documents like Aadhaar and voter ID card,” added Mohammed Jabbar*.

On being asked about citizenship, Kamil Haque*, added:

“Our children have an Indian passport and work in Gulf countries, how can a person who does not have a citizenship have a passport? But it is very difficult to make authorities understand that we are Kashmiris.”

Resilience

Despite living in Kashmir all their life and tracing their origins to Kashmir, the community still faces marginalisation both on the ethnic level as well as the social level. The members allege that they have not been fully accepted by the Kashmiri society as their own.

“We are still called Tibetans, even though they (Kashmiris) call us brothers, but they have not accepted us as their own,” added Imran Hussain*.

In a place like Kashmir where the socio-political fabric of the society is intricately woven and complex, the Tibetan Muslims are yet to find their place as natives. As such their struggle for survival and identity continues amid the changing socio-political fabric of Kashmir.

Despite the issues about questions of ‘identity’ which revolve around being ‘Tibetan’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Kashmiri Tibetan Muslim’, the members of the community have shown their resilience in maintaining the proper balance. Living amidst dominant Kashmiri-speaking

Kashmiri Muslims, the community maintained the essence of their identity by preserving their traditions, such as language, dress, cuisine and rituals in the celebrations.

For decades, the community members learnt skills such as tailoring Kashmiri dresses, *tila-sozi* and leather works, which provided them means of livelihood. Due to dependence on the Kashmiri-speaking population from the neighbourhood for day-to-day needs and their businesses, the members of the community have learnt the Kashmiri language.



A Tibetan Muslim Community Health Centre sponsored by Central Tibet Administration, Dharamshala. Photo: Khalid Wasim

The Tibetan Muslim community members, both at Eidgah settlement and Tibetan colony of Hawal, work for the cleanliness of the lanes and by-lanes. At the time of crisis, Tibetans come together to help the needy within the community. Tibetan women make woolen sweaters, socks, mufflers and gloves and sell these in the local markets during winter time.

Although there is no guarantee of government jobs for the young generation, the community encourages young boys and girls to attend school. The community has established a Tibetan Public School in Srinagar which is attended by both Tibetan as well as local Kashmiri children. The educated youth in the community who are not getting jobs in the government sector have found alternative means of livelihood.

**Some names have been changed on request to protect the identity of the respondents.*

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