

What India owes Tibetans in exile

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On a visit to the border village of Turtuk (Ladakh) in 2005, the then seventy-year-old Dalai Lama accepted the gift of a walking cane as the harbinger, not of ageing, but of a long life. The villagers—whose people were a composite of tribes from Iran, Tibet, Dard, and Mongolia—held the Dalai Lama in deep affection and regard, and spoke of him as a “rehnuma” (leader or guide).

As he turns 88 today (July 6), it is time to reflect on the many gifts his six-decade-long presence in India has brought to our land and our people. The Tibetan community that followed him into exile after March 1959 has helped breathe fresh life into lay- and monastic institutions of Buddhist learning around India, served local communities, and championed India across the world.

Tibetans in exile have worked tirelessly for host societies around their settlements as a sign of gratitude towards India for granting refuge. This has ranged from creating employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for locals and bolstering tourism to, more recently, strengthening the Indian response to the Covid 19 pandemic by organizing relief drives and encouraging trained Tibetan healthcare professionals to volunteer in nearby Indian hospitals.

Serving an interconnected Himalayan world

As documented in Geleck Palsang’s film *Prayers Answered* (2009), following the Dalai Lama’s visit to Turtuk and with his personal encouragement, a group of village students were enrolled in the neighboring Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) school. The children are culturally Tibetan and Muslim, and the school provides resources for both those parts of their identity to flourish.

The TCV (formerly, the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children) was founded in 1960 to care for orphaned Tibetan children and those who had been separated from their families. It now comprises a network of eight residential schools and four day schools across India, as well as youth hostels, colleges, and vocational centres. It serves 16,726 children, a large number among whom come from the Himalayan states in India and neighbouring countries. Many like historian Siddiq Wahid have lauded the success of the TCV model of schooling, and advocated it for the wider Himalaya.

The Tibetan community in exile has also helped preserve Buddhist heritage, inter-faith harmony, and wisdom traditions across the Himalaya. The Dalai Lama's personal presence, his philosophy of secular ethics, and his patronage and encouragement of organizations on the ground have enhanced the material well-being, self-esteem, and cultural pride of Himalayan peoples— be they Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim.

In these parts of the country, gratitude and reverence for the Dalai Lama have flown organically and reciprocally for centuries before the rupture caused by his exile. In the six decades since, his unifying role among Himalayan Buddhist communities is widely recognised:

If you will come to our country,

We will put our golden saddle on our finest horse,

In our golden platter with a silver lid,

We will serve you.

There is no other sentient being like you,

And you are worth this grand welcome.

— Song welcoming the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to Turtuk village (Source: *Prayers Answered*)

The reciprocal debt of dharma

India's first deputy prime minister Sardar Vallabhai Patel had written to Prime Minister Nehru of India's responsibility towards the Tibetan people in 1950: "The tragedy of it is that the Tibetans put faith in us; they chose to be guided by us; and we have been unable to get them out of the meshes of Chinese diplomacy or Chinese malevolence." From the 1950s onwards, Tibetan supporters in India have employed evidence of Tibet's cultural, linguistic, and religious borrowing from India to exhort the government towards supporting the Tibetan cause.

Among these supporters was N.K. Rustomji, who had served as Government of India's advisor to Bhutan and Sikkim. In 1965, barely three years after the Sino-Indian War, and six years after the Dalai Lama had escaped into India, he made an impassioned case for

India's support for the exiled leader. Rustomji pointed out that while Tibet owed a debt of gratitude to India for the teachings of past masters, in the present, it was India that was indebted to Tibetans in exile.

Santarakshita (eighth century CE), Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche (eighth century CE), Marpa (eleventh century CE), and Atisha (eleventh century CE) had expounded Buddhist teachings and assisted in translating the Buddhist canon into Tibetan. In his broadcast to All India Radio in September 1965, Rustomji pointed out that Tibetan refugees who followed the Dalai Lama were keeping alive precious manuscripts and sustaining monastic traditions that had long disappeared in India, often at great peril to themselves:

[W]hile leaving behind their personal possessions, [they] have remembered, in the fullness of their faith, to bring with them the precious Tibetan translations of ancient Indian texts on early Buddhism that had long ago disappeared from their homeland...

In the late 1960s through the 1980s, E. Gene Smith, at the Library of Congress Field Office in Delhi, oversaw the reprinting of many of these texts brought by Tibetan exiles, and by Tibetan-speaking communities in the Himalaya. The texts laid the foundation for the Buddhist Digital Resource Center, formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center.

To be sure, Tibetans who followed the Dalai Lama into exile were not the first or the only ones who brought Buddhist manuscripts to India. Decades earlier, Indian scholars such as Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917) and Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963), as well as imperial spies disguised as Buddhist lamas, had travelled to Tibet and brought back Buddhist texts, paintings, and artifacts; Sankrityayan's extensive collection is housed at the Patna Museum.

Institution Building

On 28 January 2021, as Indian and Chinese troops faced off in Ladakh in the western Himalaya, [this paper reported](#) about the Indian Army's proposal for its officers to study Tibetology. The planned course of study included "Tibetan history, culture, and language on both sides of the Line of Actual Control and the International Boundary." It aimed to "counter the propaganda and spread of influence by China" by equipping officers with better knowledge about Tibet. The move was a welcome step forward, since Sino-Indian relations cannot be approached through a strictly bilateral prism that left Tibet and the Himalaya out.

The Indian Army Training Command (ARTRAC) identified seven institutes in India at the time where officers could enrol for training in Tibetology. Two of these— the School of Buddhist Philosophy in Leh, Ladakh (now known as the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies) and the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath— were established in the early institution-building years after Independence, and focused on the study of Buddhism. Prime Minister Nehru had suggested to Foreign Secretary Subimal

Dutt (1955-61) that CIHTS at Sarnath be run almost entirely by the Tibetan monks who had followed the Fourteenth Dalai Lama into exile after 1959. The Tibetan exile community has since shepherded this institution.

A third, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim, was inaugurated by India's first Prime Minister in 1958; the Fourteenth Dalai Lama had laid its foundation the previous year on his way back from India for the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations. Also on the list was the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education in Bengaluru, which was established for Tibetans in exile as part of the Tibetan Children's Village under the exile administration.

We need to foreground the institution-building roles and daily acts of service by the Dalai Lama himself and by the thriving Tibetan exile community spread across India. Tibetans have never been amiss in expressing their gratitude to India for refuge and freedom, and it is time we gave our thanks too.

Happy birthday and a happy long life, Your Holiness.

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