

Upholding the Voice of Tibet: Efforts for Preservation of Tibetan Language and Cultural Identity

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Introduction

Language preservation is critical in maintaining the integrity of a culture, especially in marginalized and indigenous communities. The loss of language can signify the erosion of an entire cultural ecosystem, while its preservation ensures that traditions and histories survive. For Tibetans, their language remains not only a medium for communication but also a profound symbol of their ongoing struggle to preserve their identity, history, and spiritual heritage in the face of external pressures. This paper focuses on the role of migration and the loss of Tibetan language due to that in Tibetan refugee communities in India.

Results: Brief History of China and Tibet

- **Early Relations:** T'ang Dynasty marriage and Yuan Dynasty shared rule.
- **Qing Dynasty Control:** Formalized rule, aggressive policies (e.g., Zhao Erfeng).
- **Tibet's Brief Independence (1913–1950):** Vulnerable due to lack of global recognition.
- **CCP Occupation (1950):** Strategic importance, legitimacy for CCP.
- **1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement:** Signed under duress, undermined Tibetan culture.
- **1959 Uprising:** Brutally suppressed, Dalai Lama and 80,000 Tibetans fled.
- **Ongoing Marginalization:** Post-1950s cultural and political suppression led to mass displacement.

Objectives of Research

To explore the history and conflict of Tibet, with a specific focus on the implications of Tibetan migration in 1959 on identity formation, stability, and continuity

Research Questions:

1. What has been the nature of linguistic preservation adopted by the Tibetan community post-migration in India
2. What are some challenges faced in matters of language erosion
3. What has been the response of 2nd and 3rd gen Tibetans to the question of language preservation

Methodology

- **Qualitative approach** using a phenomenological approach where the study seeks to understand the question of language preservation from the perspective of Tibetan immigrants in India.
- **Secondary Sources:** Archival materials, reports from governmental/international agencies, existing scholarship on Tibetan language.
- **Primary Sources:** In-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with 6 respondents (received through snowball sampling) of first and second-generation Tibetan immigrants in Delhi, Darjeeling, Dharamshala.

Results: Aftermath of Displacement

Despite ongoing suppression, displaced Tibetans, especially in India, have actively engaged in cultural reconstruction efforts to preserve their language, arts, and heritage, ensuring the continuity of Tibetan identity in exile. This research explores these initiatives through interviews with linguistic and cultural experts, focusing on the framework of Tibetan language preservation and its future.

How are displaced Tibetans preserving their language and culture?

1. Educational Initiatives
2. Documentation & Archives
3. Cultural Institutions and Organisations
4. International Support

Educational Initiatives

- **CTA Department of Education:**
- **Formation of Tibetan Children's Village (TCV):**
- **Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society:**
- **Manjushree Centre of Tibetan Culture (Darjeeling, 1988):**

Quote (From a founding member of Manjushree Centre):

- *"Many of the second generation parents of the kids at home speak minimal Tibetan...The fear of a loss of language is there. That is the reason we felt a need for a Tibetan centre— Tibetan children can interact with each other and children from other schools and they can learn a lot from that."*

Generational Disconnect:

- Many second-generation Tibetans speak Tibetan at home but third-generation children face increasing disconnect due to cosmopolitan influences.
- Interviews emphasized the need to promote Tibetan language use at home for cultural preservation.

Documentation and Archives

Role of Archives:

- Vital for preserving Tibetan language, culture, and identity.
- Serve as educational resources for both Tibetans and others.

Tibet Oral History Project (2003):

- Captures personal histories of elder Tibetans pre-Chinese occupation.
- Focus on culture, religion, resistance, and Chinese invasion.
- 304 interviews from diverse locations; distributed to global institutions.

Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (1970):

- Established by the Dalai Lama to safeguard Tibetan manuscripts and artefacts.
- Includes a digital library, oral history, and photographic archives.

“Without language, nothing remains, you lose so much of your culture.”

Photographic Archive (1991):

- Counters propaganda, showcases Tibet’s rich history.

Tibet Museum (1998):

- Permanent exhibit: *“I am Tibetan, This is My Story”* with over 29,000 images documenting Tibetan history and culture.

Cultural Institutions and Organizations

Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre (Darjeeling)

- **Established:** October 2nd, 1959, to aid Tibetan refugees crossing into India.
- **Community:** Home to 650 refugees, sustaining livelihood through handicrafts.
- **Economic Activities:**
 - Handicrafts, including carpet weaving, as the main source of income.
 - Products exported to 36 countries worldwide.
- **Skill Training:**
 - 1,600 trained in crafts, 1,000 started independent businesses.
 - Training in wool refinement, coat and shawl making.
- **Cultural Preservation:**
 - Tibetan language is spoken exclusively to promote cultural identity and community bonds.

International Support for Tibet

International Support for Tibet

- **International Campaign for Tibet (ICT):** Advocates for Tibetan rights and autonomy at global platforms since 1988.
- **U.S. Support:**
 - **Tibetan Policy Act (2002):** Recognizes Tibet as "occupied" and ensures U.S. advocacy for Tibetan human rights and culture.
 - *“The act holds the U.S. government responsible for “promoting a policy to protect the distinct historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of Tibet.”*
- **UN Concerns:**
 - Criticized China’s forced relocations and state-run schools undermining Tibetan culture.
 - *“Tibetan children are losing their native language... contributing to their assimilation and erosion of their identity.”*
- **UN Special Rapporteurs:** Warned against Sinicization affecting Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Kazakhs.

Discussion on the Challenges and Threats

Language and Identity in Tibetan Diaspora

- **Economic Necessity:** To secure employment, immigrants often need to learn dominant languages. As noted by a respondent, “Language is also important for Tibetans so that we don't get assimilated into the Indian identity.”
- **Generational Shifts:** First-generation Tibetans retain their native language more easily, whereas third-generation Tibetans are more likely to mix languages. For example, one respondent observed, “With the third generation, the language is a little bit of a problem. My kids can speak Tibetan but not fluently.”
- **Assimilation vs. Preservation:** Economic advantages of languages like English and Hindi lead younger Tibetans to prioritize these languages over Tibetan. A respondent shared, “We try to keep whatever we can of our culture alive... Outside our business we speak in Tibetan but here only in English or Hindi.”

Discussion on the Challenges and Threats

- **Lack of Formal Education:** Tibetan language education is often unavailable in mainstream Indian schools, making it challenging for some to access. This issue is highlighted by the fact that “Tibetan is not taught in government-funded schools... making it difficult for Tibetans residing in off-the-grid places to access.”
- **Cultural Conflict:** Emphasizing linguistic proficiency can create a division within the community, as some feel that knowing the language is crucial for being a “complete Tibetan.” As one respondent stated, “When it comes to your culture and language, it's very important one knows their own language... so that you have become a complete Tibetan.”

Discussion on the Challenges and Threats

- **Perspective of 2nd and 3rd generation Tibetans:**

The shift to English among younger generations of Tibetan refugees has led to a significant decline in Tibetan language fluency. While the first generation was proficient and used the language daily, second and third generations became less fluent, speaking Tibetan mainly at home. As they attended English-medium schools and prioritized career prospects, Tibetan language use diminished. Though some children attended Tibetan language schools, the number was limited, and many still shifted to English for higher education. This generational decline has contributed to a growing cultural disconnect, weakening the younger generations' ties to their native identity.

Discussion on the Challenges and Threats

- **Perspectives of Tibetans about current existing provisions:**

Despite the efforts of the Tibetan government in exile, educational initiatives, and various preservation organizations, many respondents still felt the generational gap in language proficiency poses a significant threat. As younger generations adapt to dominant languages and cultures, the Tibetan language—central to their cultural continuity—faces a risk of erosion.

Conclusion

The Tibetan diaspora's struggle to preserve its cultural and linguistic heritage amidst ongoing challenges, highlights the crucial role of language in maintaining community identity.

Language is more than a tool for communication; it is the cornerstone of shared history, knowledge, and identity. For the Tibetan community, preserving their language is essential not only for maintaining cultural traditions but also for ensuring their unique identity in the face of global integration. As such, it is vital for both the diaspora and their supporting organizations to intensify efforts to sustain and revitalize the Tibetan language, ensuring that the community's rich heritage endures for future generations.