

Redefining Statelessness and the State: A Case Study of the Tibetan Youth in Exile in India

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Tibetans arrived in India with His Holiness Dalai Lama in 1959 after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Since then, they have been residing in India as “refugees” with a Government-in-Exile that acts as a pseudo-state. Even after six decades of residence in India, Tibetans are still stateless and de facto refugees in India. The existing scholarship has looked at the maintenance of the statelessness by the refugee community as a deliberate political act to preserve the Tibetan identity in exile. The Tibetan government in exile is seen as rehearsing the state-like functions without a well-demarcated territory to influence the lives and choices of the Tibetan refugees and ensure their loyalty to the Tibetan nation. However, with changing power dynamics on the INTERNATIONAL, Indian, and Chinese planes, the refugees, specifically the youth is, proactively asserting and redefining the meanings of state and statelessness. Among others, the fear of their position and agency in India post-Dalai Lama has been a major contributing factor for the youth to stand for the existence of their community that is also being outnumbering within the Chinese state. This paper examines the statelessness of the Tibetan exile community within the Indian state with specific reference to the Youth in Exile. As defined in this paper, statelessness holds different meanings for the different generations of the exile population. For the first generation of the exile community, statelessness referred to “maintaining the refugee status” and “continuing the struggle for the freedom of homeland.” For the second and third-generation exile youth born in India, statelessness is a state of confusion of multiple identities. The paper examines how the youth is redefining statelessness with specific reference to the exile government and the host state. In doing so, the paper focuses on a) the youth’s growing aspiration for a successful life than mere biological existence and survival, b) the youth’s way of redefining the host state through the demand for citizenship, c) the youth’s way of acclimatizing with the changed circumstances through outmigration and, d) the youth’s aspiration for holding dual citizenship, that is of the host state and the Tibetan nation. The paper will be theoretical and based on a qualitative method of research. The study uses Judith Butler’s theory of ethno-political construct, where refugees act as political actors that are both agentic and vulnerable. The Butlerian epistemological framework designs refugee agency, resistance, and decision making as political qualities of the refugees previously looked at from the prism of the threat-victim binary by the dominant frameworks. The primary outcome of the paper is to

understand the Tibetan youth being refugees behaving as political actors and exerting their agency, looking at themselves beyond the perspective of the victim. And while doing so, how are the Tibetan youth trying to change their political and socio-economic circumstances through redefining the meanings of state and statelessness.

Keywords: Statelessness, Tibetan, Youth in Exile, India, refugees