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## **IDENTITY IN FLUX: APPREHENDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TIBETAN REFUGEES IN INDIA**

### ***Abstract***

*The Tibetan identity in exile is typically construed as a cogent, coherent and monolithic identity drawing meanings from its religious and historical moorings. By foregrounding on the mixed methods approach, the paper problematizes the premise of a consistent and congealed identity among the Tibetan refugees in the Indian Himalayan region by contrasting experiences of Tibetans in homogeneous and heterogeneous environments. Additionally, by taking cognizance of the salience of intersectionality, the study examines the lived experiences by underscoring everyday contingencies of generational differences, spatial situatedness and cultural affinities with the host country determining the very contours of their identity.*

**Keywords:** *Indian Himalayas, Identity, Refugee, Tibetan, lived experiences*

### **Introduction**

The age of globalization, migration, mobility and constant movement problematizes the surerity of an invariant, stable and ossified 'identity' (for e.g. ethnic identity). The idea that (ethnic) identities remain unchanged or completely insulated (read unaffected) from external circumstances or changes remains an outdated one (Hall 1994: 225; Hall 2000: 8; Lawler 2015; 3). Extant works of literature indicates how ruptures and divergences have gradually undermined the supposed 'immutability' and 'monolithic' characterizations of identity (Ibid).

In contemporary times, the rhetoric of a monolith and a stable identity becomes problematic because of the multiplicities of vectors that influence and impinge upon identities (Crenshaw, 2017). In a similar strain, it becomes plausible to advance the premise that identity is intersectional and is contingent upon factors like spatial organisation, cultural disposition; socio-historical

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contextuality and generational difference which contribute to the perception of identity (Chimienti et. al, 2019: 2-6; Vijver et. al, 2015: 2). Given such backdrop of the possibilities of 'shifting' or 'protean' identities, the present paper attempts to assess the identity dynamics of Tibetan refugees who have settled in India.

Analogous to other identities in diaspora with a shared socio-historical past, the collective histories of displaced Tibetans is an important attribute to consider when assessing the dynamics of Tibetan identity. The Tibetan identity in diaspora is hinged on the collective experiences of coerced migration when Tibetans fled to India because of the incursions led by the Peoples Republic of China when they invaded Tibet in the year 1950 (Mishra, 2014: 14). Post PLA's onslaught, thousands of Tibetans fearing cultural deprivation and repression of one's identity embarked on an exodus with their spiritual leader, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 1959, the Dalai Lama arrived at Chutangmu, (India) navigating through the treacherous terrains of Himalayas accompanied by his followers (Subba, 2011: 131-132). Many Tibetans considered the PLA incursion and oppression as a direct attack against their culture coupled with a conscious attempt to obliterate their identity. Also, apart from the collective histories of departure from their homelands, it would also require considering other important axes or variables that could possibly influence the 'Tibetan identity' in diaspora. In a similar vein, works of literature have expounded on identities in diaspora or refugee identities by including conceptualizations such as generational differences and cultural assimilation with the host country (Chimienti et. al, 2019: 2-6; Sachdeva & Surjyajeewan, 2021: 11-12; Vijver et. al, 2015: 2; Subba, 2002: 132-133). For example, Chimienti et. al in their work mention the differences in terms of experiences of the first and subsequent generations of migrants in Europe. The second generation are not always considered to be belonging to the country they were born in and are commonly thought of as foreigners often subjecting them to discrimination (2019: 2-6). Similarly, Subba also iterates on the generational differences of Tibetan refugees in India but observes the variances in terms of aspirations harboured by the old and the younger generations because of the latter's access to secular education and other amenities rendering them to be oriented more towards material success and survival than sheer identity and cultural concerns (2002: 132-133). Similarly, Routray in his work on the Tibetan refugees settled in India inform about the challenges confronted by the Central Tibetan Administration while reconciling generational differences of Tibetans born in India and Tibetans fleeing from Tibet to India and their respective interpretations of Tibetan identity (2007: 87).

Apropos to the 'tibetan identity', the presence of the Central Tibetan Administration established for self-governance and preservation of socio-cultural identity of Tibetan refugees also needs to be acknowledged for its salience and influence. Although the CTA is committed for 'free democratic administration',

it also sought to create multiple policies implementing measures to preserve Tibetan culture and identity in exile founded on the aspirations to return back to Tibet (Mishra, 2014:14). For Anand, the establishment of CTA has successfully created Tibetan community-in-exile enabling them to maintain a discrete national identity among disparate groups from various parts of greater Tibet' (2000 : 271). He further articulates the Tibetan identity as 'Tibetanness' which he contends should be understood by considering the circumstances of diaspora coupled with their belongingness to a discrete place (2000: 284). Contrarily, Giles & Dorjee, Bentz and Diehl's foregrounded the challenges encountered by two millennia old Tibetan civilisation struggling to maintain their culture and identity (Giles et. al, 2005: 138-157; Bentz, 2012: 80-107; Diehl, 2002: 1-269). Additionally, the works analyse the challenges confronted by Tibetans and the tensions that arise in acknowledging their refugee label and diasporic status. Similarly, Basu highlights how places and identities are transformed by refugees negotiating their belonging in an alien country over time (2018: 212). He attempts to analyze the identity negotiations as refugees while coming to terms with their status as a "permanently exiled" diasporic group (2018: 212). Refugee identities are seen as historically and culturally constituted and are born out of the constant movement and homecoming practices of refugee groups in varied local settings (2018 : 212). However, political determinations for preserving Tibetan culture and identity is replete with challenges as multiple factors viz. socio-cultural assimilation and integration of the refugees with the host society impedes the reification of the same. Similarly, Anand informs that 'a unified homogenous Tibetan-in-exile identity is more of a rhetorical device and imaginary construct than some verifiable reality' (2000 : 271). In a similar strain, Houston & Wright in their work inform about the multiplicities of experiences of Tibetan refugees and their perceptions of identity and nationalism when living amidst varying social milieus viz. McLeod Ganj, India; Kathmandu, Nepal; and Boston, USA (2003: 217-230). They further contend that Tibetan refugees negotiate their refugee identities in multiple ways i.e. either by accepting citizenship of their host countries or by abiding to the Tibetan cause which would in turn maintain their international relevance (Ibid). Such studies unfixes the monolithic Tibetan identity in diaspora rhetoric wherein all perceptions, interpretations and meanings of identity is sourced from the nationalistic idealism perpetuated by political organizations or key spiritual figures. In a similar vein, Falcone and Wangchuk in their work on the Tibetan refugees in India disrupts the contention of a singular idea of 'Tibetanness' or Tibetan identity and instead hints at the possibilities of multiplicities of Tibetan identities influenced by contingencies like intersubjectivity and histories (2008: 192-193).

Considering such works and the salience of the axes of generation and degrees of cultural assimilation and its possible nexus with identity, the study problematizes the premise that the 'Tibetan identity' can be characterized as a homogenous and immutable entity by foregrounding on the lived experiences

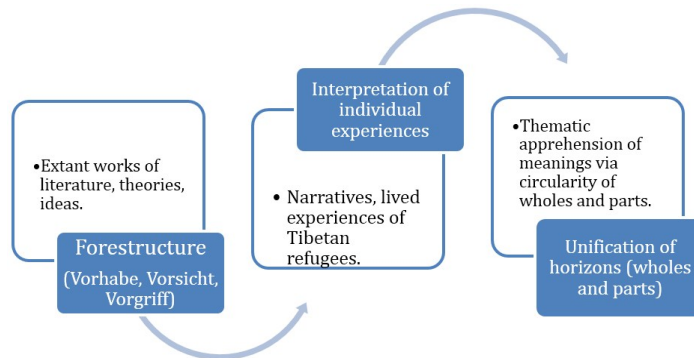
of Tibetan refugees residing in India. The study therefore employs conceptual categories viz. intergenerational differences i.e. first and second generations determined by their arrival as refugees or their birth in India, their spatial organisation of the settlement and lastly their socio-cultural, racial proximity, and linguistic affinity with neighbouring communities. The paper primarily seeks to apprehend the configurations of Tibetan identity and its key defining features.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

To fulfil the primary objective of the study, viz. the apprehension of the multiplicities of Tibetan identity in India, the research employs the mixed methods framework which allows for a flexible approach to apply the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. For the qualitative research, the study espouses the Heideggerian Hermeneutic phenomenological framework (Heidegger, 1999 : 10-12). Heideggerian Phenomenology, conversely, diverges from the epistemological concerns of pure phenomenology and advances the thesis of 'being-in-the-world'. Heidegger supplants metaphysics of subjects intending objects as it advances the premise of perceiving the world and all its entities as simply 'present-at-hand' or '*vorhanden*' bypassing the question of the being of beings (Ibid). Similarly, for the Tibetan refugees, identity is not disclosed as an object that is unfamiliarly conspicuous and extended in space which requires imposition of meanings. Conversely, the meaning of identity is illuminated by beings who harbour preliminary understanding of beings viz. humans or *Dasein* (Ibid). Heidegger posits that *Dasein* possesses a preconceptual understanding of 'being' and is always already amidst the world (Inwood, 2019: 13-16). The special nomenclature accorded to *Dasein* denotes the conflation of the world with *Dasein* (Ibid). Similarly, the worldliness of the Tibetan refugees constitutes an integral element when examining identity as multiple factors such as intergenerational differences, the specificities of historical junctures and collective temporal experiences which constitutes their being in the world. Particularly, the 'Tibetan identity in exile' is invariably steeped in historical socio-political polemics, the significance of their homeland and the binaries of home and host countries which collectively contributes to the intersubjective imaginations of Tibetan identity in exile. Considering the interplay of such variables and its influences on identity, it would be implausible to insulate the stream of experiences from its worldly engagements. In alignment with the Heideggerian principles, the study repudiates the Cartesian subject/object dichotomies because such binaries would disengage individuals from the worldliness receding them to the realms of abstracted subjectivism. Similarly, Schimdt elucidates Heidegger's premise that subjects do not commence with intending objects imposing meanings (Schmidt, 2013: 51). Rather, all objects in toto are situated in contextual spaces saturated with pre-ordained meanings (Ibid). Hence, the lived experiences of being in the world gains primacy as it is engaged in everyday worldliness (Ibid). The study employs the method of

hermeneutics to analyse lived through experiences, their subsequent meanings and salience apropos the Tibetan identity in exile. Hermeneutics or the ability to interpret constitutes an imperative element of Heidegger’s existential thesis. Heidegger characterizes *Dasein* or *being-in-the-world* as a ubiquitous presence (Dahlstrom, 2013: 92-94). Heidegger uses hermeneutics to extract ‘meaningful’ accounts of lived experiences (Ibid). Moreover, Heidegger considers interpretation as a foundational essence of *Dasein* owing to their ability to ‘understand’ its own being which ontologically partitions it from other beings (Ibid). For Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle figures as a principal tool to coalesce *Dasein*’s temporal existence of future, past and present to apprehend the structures of being-in-the-world (Giorgi, 2007: 67-68). As per Giorgi, Hermeneutics affords the *Dasein* to illuminate the being of beings or phenomenon under investigation (Ibid).

Considering the nature of the research and its theoretical underpinnings, the paper employs the hermeneutic circle to unravel the meanings of the phenomenon. The hermeneutic circle allows for an interaction of the whole and individual domains of understanding wherein the phenomenon can be examined from both aspects (Dahlstrom, 2013: 93-94). In consistency with Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of the *Dasein* in which ‘*Auslegung*’ or interpretation figures as a prerequisite, the study initiates the circularity of hermeneutics by reading extant works of literature on identity, diaspora studies, identity in exile and experiences of Tibetan refugees coalescing it contextually with individual experiences of refugees which enables the researcher to extract a richer understanding of the phenomenon (Ibid). The following diagram represents a helical circle which comprises of the *Vorstruktur* (forestructure) representing the ‘whole’ which informs the phenomenon under study by taking recourse to topical body of works, the subsequent individual interviews demonstrating parts and the conflation of both the horizons of wholes and parts that informs and deepens the understanding of the phenomenon.



**Figure. 1 demonstrates the broad framework of spiral hermeneutic circle espoused by the study to initiate the circularity of meanings and the fusion of wholes and parts (Dahlstrom, 2013).**

For the quantitative research, the research employed the survey method and the process of data collection began with household survey using interview schedule to find the demographic structure, family size, occupational structure, income and expenditure, and to familiarise ourselves with the respondents.

### **Methods**

The research employed interview schedule, non-participant observation, and informal discussion to unearth rich experiential accounts of the refugees. The spatial sites for the study was confined to 5 Tibetan refugee settlements viz., McLeod Ganj and Dalhousie (Himachal Pradesh), Ravangla (Sikkim), Darjeeling and Sonada (West Bengal); a total of 200 respondents were selected from these settlements. Further, these respondents were proportionately stratified between first-generation refugees who migrated to India with those who were born in India to refugee parents –‘younger generation’. The fieldwork was conducted between 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018 and 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019. From each household, two respondents belonging to older and younger generations were interviewed. The upper age was fixed to below 40 and for the younger and age 40 and above for the older generation. In-depth informal discussions were carried wherever the chances of obtaining insights of lived experiences were probable. 30 case studies were conducted during the entire span of the fieldwork to substantiate the quantitative analysis using statistical exploratory technique. The interviewees were Tibetan men and women from various professions/backgrounds, the questions required an introspective analysis of their own identity.

### **Findings**

#### ***Tibetan identity***

Tibetans struggle to anchor themselves by adhering and upholding their socio-cultural practices and spiritual sanctity. Giles and Dorjee point out that in the formative years of exile, Tibetans in India devoted themselves to carrying out three important tasks (2005: 147)

...establishing the Tibetan government in exile, rehabilitating Tibetan refugees and providing Tibetan children with Tibetan and modern education... Tibetans have adopted democratic systems, to preserve/promote (*Zin kyong pel sum*) their cultural identity (Ibid).

For the Tibetans, preserving their culture, language and religion is of prime importance as it defines who they are. The markers of identity considered in the following sections are ethnicity, religion, language, nationality and citizenship issues which were determined by the researchers post reading of relevant body of works. Deploying the analytical framework of the hermeneutic

circle, the following segments presents a thematic understanding of the phenomenon by engaging in meanings engendered by the circularity between 'wholes' and its 'parts' (Dahlstrom, 2013: 93-94).

### ***Ethnicity and Religion***

Ethnicity and religion plays a pivotal role on how the Tibetan refugees situate themselves when formulating the conception of identity in a socio-culturally distinctive world. Regmi pointed out that ethnic identity formation requires common descent, socio-culturally relevant physical attributes and set of attitudes and behaviours (2003: 1-11). Through these attributes, ethnic identities are replayed as ideologies, particularly in a racially homogeneous society. Often, these ethnic ideologies are in interplay with religious dogmas and practices. Opong expounded the positive correlation between identity and religion in formation of identity (2013: 10). Considering prior works of literature (as forestructure), questions related to ethnicity and religion in connexion with identity were posed to the refugees. Quantitative analysis shows that 72.5 per cent (Figure 2) of the respondent stated that belonging to Tibetan race/ethnicity with the religious inclination towards Tibetan Buddhism is an important criterion in their very definition of being identified as Tibetan, whereas 22.5 per cent moderately disassociated Tibetan identity from ethnicity and religion as they opined that being Tibetan does not entail adhering to the same religion/ethnic group. One of the respondents pointed that there has been a misconception among various scholars for treating the Tibetan as one homogeneous ethnic group, as too with religion.

However, some scholars have erroneously construed Tibetans as a homogeneous ethnic group adhering to a uniform religion because various strains of Bon religion were practiced prior to the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet. Furthermore, a handful of respondents disagreed with religious homogeneity as an indicator of Tibetan identity owing to their religious conversion and exogamous marital alliances. Evidently, 'identity in exile' elicited divergent meanings for refugees across generations. Here, the term 'generation' plays a categorical influence in forming differing contentions pertaining to identity in exile. Generation invokes 'time' or 'temporal situatedness' which further connotes socio-political histories, salience of erstwhile spatiality reminiscent of the past and its imprints upon present experiences. In the same strain, Stroinska suggests that subjects in exile share peculiar relations with time as they are oriented and anchored temporally to the longings of the past and apprehension for the coming times (2003:13). Additionally, the first generation exhibited a strong inclination towards observance of religious/ethnic factors while subsequent generations are more accommodative towards divergent religious practices and communities. Hence, temporal and spatial experiences co-constitute change in perception in varying degrees apropos the Tibetan identity.

To assess the deeper insights of the refugees and to understand the very conceptualisation and determinant of Tibetan identity questions associated to their personal values and moral standard were administered. The study found that 93 per cent of the respondents stated the importance of values and moral standards, as it helps them to maintain a unique identity discrete from others regardless of their dwellings. The younger generations too expressed similar view as they have been socialised by their parents and grandparents in similar line of thought. However, 7 per cent of the respondents (Figure 3) asserted their willingness to embrace new ways of life to ensure survival.

Identity is lived through as an embodied experience wherein '*Daseins*' always possess an understanding of meanings generated in the world. The *Daseins* comprehend, navigate and make sense of the world only in their flux of engaged everydayness. Moreover, Henschen mentions Heidegger's conception of the '*das man*' which he articulates as the anonymous yet pervasive presence of societal norms or meanings already generated by 'the they' or '*das man*' (2012: 95-113). The eagerness on the part of some Tibetans across generations to underscore religion as an important determiner for identity vindicates the existential argument of beings thrown into the world of pre-existing meanings formulated and preserved by their forerunners. Additionally, 'mattering' or care (*sorge*) figures as a salient feature for Heidegger as it discloses things which concern the *dasein* (Dahlstrom, 2013: 42). Aho further views care as a perpetual activity oriented towards things that 'matter' or for which '*daseins*' exhibit 'care/concern' (2010: 83). Similarly, for some refugees, the urgency to preserve religious and ethnic purity does not constitute a prerequisite for the formulation of their identity while residing in foreign lands. By the same token, the nexus of ethnicity and religious values with 'Tibetan identity' is relegated in favour of a conception of identity that is fluidic and pragmatic to ensure survivability. 'Survivability' therefore manifests as 'mattering' to some respondents apropos their identity rather than the continuance of their traditional notions of identity (Aho, 2010: 83). Because of their 'thrownness' into the world or '*welt*' of pre-existing meanings, care surfaces when '*daseins*' are preoccupied in their everyday engagements (Aho, 2010: 11). This 'mattering' coupled with the extant 'forestructures' of meanings problematizes the postulation of essentialized meanings derived via experiences (Aho, 2010: 83). The disagreements articulated by the respondents substantiates the thesis of '*beings*' as interpretive embedded in the circularity of present/past meanings contingent upon the givenness of contexts (Ibid). Complimentarily, 51 per cent of the respondents feel that maintaining the core philosophical principles of Tibetan ideology is essential. They expressed their need to safeguard their practices from external cultural incursion. They also feel that they need to fortify their practices against forces of changes emanating from external cultural incursion (Figure 3). The older generation views the philosophical elements based on logic as fundamental to all life forms. The teachings and philosophy are a part of their identity which they associate



with feelings and hence it remains constant. Whereas, 25.5 per cent claimed that it has changed moderately over the years following their interaction with the host society.

A small section of respondents on the other did not consider it necessary to preserve the philosophical principles of Tibetan ideologies. Such continuum of variations with regard to Tibetan identity signals an unceasing generation of meanings formulated with the imbrication of the past experiences fusing with the present and future concerns.

The variances of identity conceptions when situated in a broader context demonstrates the fragility of the notion of a concretized identity. The attributes of identity suggested by earlier works of literature are affirmatively conformed to by some respondents and repudiated by others. For instance, respondents who have renounced their cultural tapestry for survivability conceive of their identities as rejecting the anchorage of religious and ethnic allegiances. Generational differences within the community can be attributed as an important element for producing divergence of meanings apropos their identity. Vahali mentions Tibetan identity constructed vis-à-vis the Han Chinese wherein Tibetans seem to moor their identity in religion and principles of Buddhism thereby asserting their discrete identity (2020: 1-450). For respondents who have experienced persecution from close quarters, identity discloses to them as a means to sustain attributes that segregates them from others. When analysed from a broader context, this urgency to maintain cultural purity and binaries of 'we' vs. 'them' does not stem merely from the need to promote a discrete 'Tibetan identity' in foreign lands but to forge community bonds bounded by hope and solidarity to ensure return to their homelands. In a similar strain, Bruno informs about the salience of ethnicity as a determiner when considering identity in exile (2018: 157-205). Identity in exile is therefore perceived simultaneously as a site of refuge and as a reminder of reclaiming their lost homeland .

### ***Language***

Bloch and Hirsch observed that native languages are implicit in the construction, contestation and expression of identities among 'second generation refugees' (2016: 1-19). Language is a primary marker in defining a community's identity. Using language as one of the parameters, the study observed the inclination of the Tibetans toward their language, and assess its significance as an integrating force for their cause. The study found that 97.5 per cent (Figure 4), regardless of generational differences, feel that the ability to converse and express their opinions among themselves in Tibetan instils a sense of belongingness generating 'we-feeling' among the community members. However, few of them born to refugee parents mostly staying in Dharamsala (McLeod Ganj), Darjeeling, and Sonada differed in their opinion. They argued that the emphasis should be to maintain the spiritual teachings of their

forefathers. They believe that Tibetanness manifests in their religious practices by following the dharma. For them language is a medium for disseminating religious teachings to future generations.

Evidently, most Tibetans view language as an attribute directly contributing towards reinforcing their 'identity'. As emigres, they see language as a mobilizing force to preserve the differences that invokes feelings of group solidarity. Stroinska suggests the ubiquitous influence of language on identity which is corroborated by the narratives of the Tibetan refugees (2003: 13-15). The capacities to converse and articulate oneself in their indigenous dialect ameliorates feelings of alienation and insecurities for certain sections of Tibetan refugees in exile. However, for other refugees born and raised in India, their native language is less important than religious practices and tenets of spirituality while defining their identity.

Echoing the above narrative, an elderly caretaker at Dharamsala pointed out:

*“Language is not a determiner of one’s identity. One should stress on the principles and ideas of spirituality that determine one’s identity”.*

Such variances apropos identity markers can be attributed to the convergence of factors viz. space, temporality, one’s thrownness to a given milieu and the *dasein’s* ability to interpret. Keller mentions the precedence accorded to ‘temporality’ by Heidegger over other constituents viz. spatiality and contexts (1999: 157). In the case of the Tibetans, their *Faktizität* or facticity predominantly determines their temporal experiences apropos their identities (Heidegger, 1999: 10-12). The ‘thrownness’ or ‘facticity’ of Tibetan emigres proffers a site for the lived experience to manifest wherein they formulate meanings, interpret and revise their definitions of the properties of their identity occurring within the bounds of their spatial/temporal contexts. Their facticity or their set of circumstances (viz. statelessness, displacement and diaspora) produces multiplicities of transitional interpretations that either diverge or correspond in varying degrees. Case in point, the differences of beliefs with reference to language as an attribute of Tibetan identity is derived primarily from their facticity. The specificities of the context of Tibetan refugees constitute as their thrownness or facticity and their horizon wherein their world is disclosed. For instance, the respondents born to refugee parents in Dharamsala, Sonada and Darjeeling deem language simply as a means to an end (i.e. to reinforce Tibetan identity via adherence to one’s religious practices). The generational difference therefore presents itself as a conspicuous determiner of the Tibetan identity. In a similar strain, Boyd informs about the noticeable tensions between the old and young generations and their differences in terms of receptiveness to embrace changes (2004: 101). Some Tibetans view language dismissively as a medium for cultural/religious diffusion while some view it as a chief determiner of their identities. They bypass the salience of

'language' attributing spirituality and their perception of identity as constitutive of their 'self'. Being denizens of diaspora, most Tibetans across generations have experienced displacement, political turmoil and identity loss which may be a consequence of their moorings to a common past but such an anchorage does not guarantee an invariable consensus of 'identity in exile' as the primacy placed on identity attributes varies in degrees of salience for the refugees.

### **Citizenship/Nationality**

For the refugees, the question of citizenship is a contentious issue as they cannot lay claim of Tibetan identity because of an absent sovereign nor are they naturalised citizens of India. Thus, the Tibetan identity needs to be examined within the framework of nationality as citizenship entitlements. While remarking on the connexion between identity and one's birth in one's homeland, as shown in Figure 5, 97 per cent of the respondents feels that it is outmost essential factor to be a Tibetan by birth, born within the territory of Tibet; whereas, the remaining 3 per cent of the respondent slightly differed in the opinion and expressed that that one's homeland is not tantamount in significance to maintaining moral ethos and philosophical principles which was observed by generations of refugees born in India.

The apparent disjunction between birthplace and identity can be attributed to the experiences of Tibetans in exile and their collective encounters of 'statelessness'. The absence of tangible territorial boundaries and their residence in multiple host countries renders them to perceive their identities as disassociated from the need to be born in their homeland. The refugees in their everyday experiences of their 'facticity' causes them to revise their relationships and properties of citizenship and identity. However, such properties and its contours are contingent upon the facticity of the *dasein*. The way the world discloses while engaging in the mode of '*being there*' is different for varying sections of refugees. For instance, the first generations aspires to return to Tibet. In an excerpt from the interview, a 75 year old refugee in Ravangla states "...*Tibet is not the same, it is more barren, all the beautiful houses and gompas have been destroyed*". He still longs to return to his homeland. For him, returning to Tibet is a reality which is postponed. A 60 year old man living in Dalhousie remarked that he never felt at home in India he expressed "...*Tibet is my first home and I always want to go and die there*". He feels that he is in India due to the generosity of the Indian government. He also fears that such kindness might be revoked anytime by the state and its people. Similarly, Diehl alludes to the anti-assimilationist stance espoused by some Tibetans and his holiness concerning citizenship and identity which is buoyed by their belief in finding an amicable resolution to their problems (2016: 15). The younger generations, notwithstanding their awareness about their past history expressed their preference to stay in India. Figure 6, shows how the younger generation of Tibetans who are born in India have a strong sense

of belonging and attachment to their birth place, 72.5 per cent reported that the places where they were born and brought-up are integral part of their life and identity, whereas, 22.5 per cent reported that their birthplace constitutes an integral part of their identity. Only 0.5 per cent disagreed from this understanding of identity. The notion of identity realised through Tibetan nationality or attachment to imagined territories as championed by Anderson seems contradictory when juxtaposed with the experiential accounts of Tibetans born and raised in India (2006: 17-19). Contradictorily, 91 per cent of them still feel attached to the very idea of Tibet as homeland which demands a moral obligation, whereas only 9 per cent notionally agree (Figure 7). Field inquiry therefore upends the assumption that a collective 'Tibetan identity' can be explained simply by drawing nexuses between one's identity and the archetypal identity markers, viz. one's homeland. For example, the inter-generational variances problematizes the commonplace conception of linking one's identity with one's territorial sites viz. one's homeland. Primary findings demonstrating inter-generational differences signals the divergence in terms of ideologies pertaining to 'Tibetan identity' wherein owing to the lack of homogenization of ideas and the gradual integration to one's host country renders leeway for producing possibilities of disrupting the monolith nationalist identity and its socio-cultural moorings. The multiplicities of the meanings of identity therefore cannot be severed from one's facticity and existentiality as meanings are disclosed in such intersections. The hermeneutic circle demonstrates the understandings of diasporic identities as provisional as these interpretations are embedded in the everyday *'facticity of daseins'* which disclose varying meanings of 'sheer survivability' to maintaining one's ethnic/cultural purity.

### ***Formulating Tibetan Identity and the Question of lasting Political Struggle***

For Tibetans, identity is often the product of unintended consequences emanating from gradual interaction within and mostly outside the community. Within the community, it is observed that the older generation were inclined towards practicing the Tibetan way of life, and values whilst the younger generation expressed unwillingness to conform to the constraints imposed by the community. In one of the narratives, a respondent's outgroup marriage was disapproved by the community only to be excommunicated later. He recounts- "...*This rejection is temporary, eventually they will accept me and have to accept changes*". This shows eagerness on the part of youths to be receptive to changes while expecting others to be open to same. The marital exogamy forged by the respondent can be viewed as an instance of internal community conflict when dealing with the ideal 'Tibetan identity' envisioned by his fore-bearers. Gyaltag explicates the myriad experiences of identity experienced by the youths and the older generations wherein the former challenges the latter concerning Tibetan identity and identity preservation (2003: 244-255). He mentions the younger generation's inevitable experiences

of interacting and integrating with the cultural practices of the host country consequently engendering intra community conflicts between the young and older generations (Ibid). Saklani, reiterates by mentioning the emergence of a Tibetan 'youth collective' distinct from their elderly community (1978:4). Change therefore figures as a pervasive presence for the Tibetan refugees apropos their identity. But cultural assimilation notwithstanding, not all refugees compromise their cultural identity. As Penny-Dimtri discussed, being recipients of financial assistance and opportunities from people across the globe, the Tibetans elicited envy from their less fortunate neighbours causing considerable conflicts between them and the locals of Himachal Pradesh (1994: 280-293). Such conflicts, to a larger extent, kindled in-group solidarity among the refugees rousing feelings of 'us' vs. 'them'. Additionally, discrimination and labelling of the refugees by the locals induced reification of a concrete identity. Contextually locating within the argued line of thought, the respondents were enquired about their views on being in India, 64.5 per cent (Figure 8) of respondents pointed that being in India allows for proximity to follow their spiritual leader; whereas the younger generation believes that India proffers them better socio-economic avenues which were not possible in Tibet. Whereas, 28.5 per cent differed moderately viewing India as a transient shelter hoping for their eventual return to Tibet. Many respondents. Some other respondents A 65-years-old woman in Dharamsala recounted, "...*In our society everyone is treated equally, when I heard of the caste system, I wondered how caste makes one lower or higher. In our society everyone is treated equally*". Taking the argument further, a 70-years old man from Ravangla narrated "...*Nothing has changed for us, we are Tibetans and we will remain so, whether we stay in Sikkim or any other part of India. We have a responsibility to preserve our culture and we are doing that.*" Such determination has rendered the sustenance of lasting political struggle of the Tibetan refugees. They deem it necessary to support and be aware about the constant struggles experienced by the Tibetans and to be informed about developments as many of their family members/relatives are still in Tibet. Additionally, it promotes homogenization of ideas and beliefs projecting it as central constituents of 'Tibetan identity'. However, the rest placed primacy on their situation in India than maintaining a homogeneous identity. 90 per cent (Figure 9) of Tibetans in the Indian Himalayan regions supports the cause and believes that the struggle must kept alive until total freedom of Tibet is achieved from communist China. Relatively, 46 per cent of the respondents believe in keeping the political activism in India alive with the assertion that coming generation need to be politically informed as they are the future for Tibetan cause (Figure 10). However, 41.5 per cent of the respondent opined, the political struggle would significantly be impactful if staged in Tibet rather than in India. Whereas, 5 per cent of the respondents, belonging to the older generation, did not believe in such politically motivated activism. They are rather content staying alongside his Holiness believing it to be their moral duty to follow his decisions. In conjunction to the above

analysis, 62.5 per cent believe in sustaining political activism in India asserting that future generations needs to be politically aware as they are the successors of the Tibetan cause. whereas, 19.5 per cent beg to differ (Figure 11).

### **Generational Differences**

Identity relies on everyday lived through experiences of Tibetan refugees as *daseins* which allow for the disclosure of meanings of identity. Considering their facticity, generational differences constitutes as an integral variable determining their identity beliefs.

*Older Generation:* Narrative accounts of the earlier generation of refugees revealed physical and psychological traumatic experiences. Many encountered sexual assaults and were deprived of their belongings (not necessarily by Chinese soldiers alone). Those refugees who crossed the Nepal border to reach Himachal Pradesh reportedly experienced more atrocities as compared to those who took the North-Eastern route, particularly, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. One respondent mentioned that to prepare for possible challenges he had joined the Indian army. Contradictorily, most of the earlier generation of Tibetans were more content staying in proximity with his holiness the Dalai Lama as he represents the embodiment of living God leading them to a righteous path. They further noted that there is no rational reason to return as many of their kin/friends are long gone and few of those left are settled in India. Nonetheless, they feel nostalgic about their homeland, saying- "*Though India is my home, Tibet will always remain my first home*". This nostalgia is often mitigated by a pragmatic realisation that the past for which they yearn has become the shadow of the past with no solution in the future. Yet they are cognizant of the developments in Tibet as they interact with oncoming refugees. The older generations see the present situation as irreversibly gone awry but Tibet still is viewed as a source of solace in their imagination. For them, the preservation of their identity equals following the religious teachings, customs, language and morals. A teacher at Dharamsala recalls- '*For us, Buddhism is our way of life and Dharma is what differentiates us from others.*' Some described their culture as unique, because it has the blessing of his Holiness. The older generation particularly, feels that being a Tibetan is a privilege, as their society has relatively no hierarchical social organisation when compared to the host society, particularly around the Dalhousie and Dharamsala settlement areas. In a similar vein, Safran speaks of community assimilation to one's host country in terms of a continuum wherein the diaspora communities may integrate with their local cultures of the host country adopting their customs and lifestyle on one end while repudiating the same and mobilizing their community members to encourage retention of their indigenous cultures and religious practices (1991: 3). Furthermore, Gyaltag (2003) foregrounds the postulation of the degrees of cultural assimilation with one's milieu which in turn determines the retention

of one's cultural moorings. One can therefore interpret the multiplicities of stances expressed by the refugees with respect to their identity in a continuum wherein the anchorage to one's native culture and identity are contingent upon the community's integration for the maintenance of a common identity consciousness rooted in similarities of historical origins, social/religious and cultural experiences.

### **Younger Generation:**

Many consider India their home preferring the Indian lifestyle/cuisines which are as popular as their own. Several respondents accepted the Indian way of life assimilating with the Indian culture asserting their concomitant responsibilities for India and their homeland. When asked regarding their perception of India as homeland or 'potential homeland', the youths responded that Tibet is partly their homeland because it is their parents homeland. They envision settling there, but since they were raised in India, they feel more at home here. They have experienced cultural freedom in India which enabled them to aspire for career growths which would have been unlikely in Tibet. Few of them argued that the younger generations are uninterested in adapting the Tibetan identity for political gains. Nonetheless, they connected with such issues via social media and exchanged their views. They also harboured a broader worldview in relation to inter-community marriages. It was observed that age itself is a factor among the refugees because it was difficult for the older generations to adopt to new socio-cultural environments. Thus, social displacement became more pronounced among older generation of refugees.

### **Regional Variance**

Tibetan identity has been further problematized in relation to the challenges emanating from the widespread distribution of settlement areas. For instance, refugees settled in McLeod Ganj and Dalhousie areas are surrounded by communities who are racially, socio-culturally, religiously, and linguistically distinct from their own. These factors posed severe challenges in the process of their integration with the host society causing them to maintain their cultural identity. On the other hand, refugees settled in Ravangla, Darjeeling and Sonada find themselves in a socio-culturally homogeneous environment yielding a sense of psychological accommodativeness with similar food habits and belief systems along with the preponderance of Buddhist devotees in these regions. Thus, the level of differential integration in these settlements determines the crystallisation of their cultural identity—'Tibetanness', creating challenges for the CTA objectives. Hence, it is imperative to understand the social experiences of the Tibetan refugees in different settlement areas.

***Darjeeling, Ravangla and Sonada:***

Taking into account the cultural affinity shared between refugees and the local inhabitants (Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepali communities), most respondents from the aforesaid regions reportedly experienced cultural proximity. The refugees also shared religious and cultural likeness with the Bhutias of Sikkim documented to have migrated to Sikkim from Tibet. However, the expected hypothetical social bridges between them were not observable primarily because of the variances in perception. Whilst the refugees asserted their cultural purity because of their retention of age old cultural practices, the Bhutias on the other perceived the former as refugees thereby refraining themselves from forging social linkages. The inimical perception notwithstanding, acts of cultural assimilation were observed in both the communities. The Bhutia costumes worn in marriages for example are observed to be more Tibetanised. Exogamous marriages were also observed between the refugees and the local population as a common practice with more pronouncement of Nepali community owing to their demographic preponderance. A respondent married to a Nepali woman recounted... *"I am happy to have a Nepali wife, she is kind-hearted and takes good care of me"*. For him, Nepali women are socialised to show respect and look into the needs of husbands which he found lacking in his society. He further reasoned that due to the practice of patriarchy in Nepali culture allowed him to enjoy greater supremacy and attention from his wife. Nottmeyer informs that marital alliances between individuals from diverse ethnic communities' signals strengthening of social, cultural and economic integration (2015: 74-75). The respondent accommodates the local cultures whilst simultaneously repudiating some characteristics of his native community. Unlike some respondents who intend on preserving the purity of their identity, the respondent above deviates from the same for pragmatic concerns. However, other refugees criticized the caste structure of Nepali society. One of the respondents highlighted, *"In our society, everyone is treated equally regardless of their social divisions viz. commoner or nobility"*. Some of the respondents also mentioned that they disliked the treatment meted out to women in Nepali society. They further remarked on their community's egalitarian stance towards women as equals with more strength and command. One of the respondent's wife, who was a Nepali narrated-*"My husband is a good human being, he is religious and has concerns for me and others. We work together and he gives me enough freedom to be who I am, the luxury which other Nepali friends do not have"*. Similarly, a 30-year-old Tibetan woman, married to a Nepali man represents the cultural synthesis of Tibetan and Nepali community and the efforts of the Tibetans to integrate themselves with the local population. In a similar vein, Wallendorf and Reilly in their work propose that the cultural assimilation transpires at differing levels ranging from adoption of food habits, the conjunction of structural assimilation, marital alliances and formation of identities (1983:293). Similar to the Tibetan refugees settled across India, the successive generations of the



exiled community experience differing levels of assimilation when residing in a host country. The 'Tibetan identity' therefore is considerably dependent on the generational contexts as it determines how individuals interact, perceive and construct one's identity. Also, the cultural assimilation of refugees in Darjeeling, Sonada, and Ravangla, transpires through social ties such as marriage and participation in other social obligations. Cultural adaptation and assimilation on the path of the refugees as well as the local population is being observed to ease the process due to the exhibited similarities along with racial affiliation creating a sense of oneness.

*Dalhousie & Dharamsala (McLeod Gunj):* Limited interaction was observed between the refugees and host communities, such as invitation in selected festivals and social occasions. Unlike the previous areas, intermarriage between the Tibetan and local community could not be ascertained, at least during the process of the study, however, this does not rule out the possibility. Nonetheless, the reason for such limited interaction could be due to the fact that the area serves as the head quarter of the Government-in-Exile and the abode of his holiness, due to which much emphasis is placed on preservation and adherence of cultural practices as per Tibetan tradition encouraging endogamous marriage. Few respondents also viewed intermarriage as a threat to preservation of Tibetan culture, arguing- *'the pure Tibetan race and culture is compromised when marrying people from different community, amounting to the loss of one's identity'*. Hence, when considering the 'Tibetan identity', the interplay of multiple factors such as group cohesion, solidarity, practical concerns, relationship with the host country (whether inimical/amicable), generational disparities, individual conceptions and indigenous ideologies of identity needs to be considered.

### **Preservation and Negotiation of Cultural Identity**

The cultural heritage of Tibetan identity remained untouched until mid-20th century. Ideas of compassion and wisdom inspires many followers to embark on pilgrimages to Tibet, India and Nepal but considering the socio-political climate in Tibet, the possibilities of threat presents tremendous challenges. For Tibetans, there are two crucial aspects they consider necessary to preserve, viz. language and religion which they see as woven with the other for the diffusion of religious principles of Buddhism. Linguistically, Tibetan belongs to Sino-Tibetan family and uses non-hieroglyphic structure. Mountcastle however, refers to the foremost challenges to language becoming more evident due to the gradual institutionalization of Mandarin competency (1994) Nonetheless, with increasing interest among the Western and regional scholars and the conscious effort towards reforming education system, monastic and modern education, Tibetan language seems to be flourishing in exile particularly in India and Nepal. For them, language is not just a medium of communication but a feature of their cultural identity.

Language allows for the transmission and preservation of religious values, beliefs and tradition reviving longings to return to one's root. Yet contradictorily, a growing inclination towards English language due to its perceived ease in comprehension and global competency is also observed amongst the younger generation. Older generations felt that the younger generation are more attuned to western/materialistic way of life which is eroding the Tibetan way of life. Others argued that while it is important to preserve their cultural identity, integration with the host community is also essential for their survival. Learning the local language for example hastens the integration process. Some of the traditions were conceded by Tibetans fearing disapproval from the host society, e.g. fraternal polyandry. These are instances to integrate themselves with the host community. Respondents at Dharamsala stressed on human values as people deserve respect regardless of their cultural background. A teacher of Tibetan Philosophy at Dharamsala, opined '*... we have to respect the cultural difference. God is one, therefore religion and culture is one*'. He agreed that if religion could be preserved, humanity could be preserved, because Buddhism is a religion based on compassion. There were others who demonstrated universal outlook and pan human values. According to a Project officer at Ravangla, '*We are all same, there is no difference. We are all here today and some day we'll be elsewhere, the challenge is to make the most of this time*'. For them, universalism does not eliminate cultural differences but instead celebrates the cultural variety creating spaces for cultures to co-exist equally in rights and importance. Many respondents answered affirmatively when asked about their religious beliefs as coping mechanisms when embroiled in difficult situations with non-Tibetans. Respondents also asserted that the preservation of religion would consequently ensure the continuation of language. The refugees therefore negotiate their identity by sustaining compatible ties despite differences with the local population. Most respondents managed to keep the balance between rootedness and openness by linking their traditional values with the universal ones progressing from individuation to universalization. When asked about the transformation apropos identity while residing in India, the respondents gave varying answers. About a half of them said with differing levels of assertion that their cultural identity remains consistent. A respondent from Ravanagla (Sikkim) recounts- '*Nothing has changed for us, we are Tibetans and will be in Sikkim or any other part of India*. Another respondent at Dharamsala, opined that '*...had we been in Tibet, maybe we would not have been so conscious, but now we are in a different part of the world and 'our world' needs to be protected and preserved.*' The respondents at Dharamsala shared that the presence of His Holiness in Dharamsala reminded of their purpose to preserve their culture notwithstanding their suffering. Respondents of the three-study area also acknowledged that education is the reason for the changes in the Tibetan society and mindset. The educated younger generation opined that considering the situation in Tibet, it is unfeasible to return and

they should instead use India as a gateway to other countries for a better life. Having born and resided in India, they felt that life here is good as they have access to most of the things. The only thing lacking is an Indian Citizenship but since they possess the yellow/green cards, it allows them to travel anywhere in India and overseas. The younger generation was not concerned with the question of 'Tibetan Identity', as per a young respondent at Dharamsala- "*clinging to your identity reduces your chances for growth and progress, everything is global, even one's identity*". However, some respondents felt that the Government creates conditions for discrimination and hostility because they are viewed as immigrants sharing resources thereby becoming richer in the process. Some respondents in Sikkim echoed this view that- "*the Nepalis of the state feel that without the Tibetan presence in Sikkim, they would have captured the market.*" This was not a general sentiment and it was observed that the Tibetans shared good relations with the locals.

The size of the Tibetan community, settlement structures, the vicinity of cultural objects all has a positive effect on preservation of culture and assimilation. Almost all the respondents were fluent in their language, even the younger generation could converse in their native language. Some respondents at Dharamsala mentioned that the proximity is a blessing in India to preserve their culture and identity. Tibetans abroad however, may have different situations. A boy from Darjeeling recalled his inability to understand the meaning of identity and his (re)introduction to Tibetan identity during his visit to Dharamsala to attend prayer sessions, participating in cultural shows surrounded by Tibetan classmates and teachers. He recounted the salience of language enabling one to forge bonds with one's community. His stay at Dharamshala strengthened his sense of relating to Tibetan identity. However, his relocation to USA rendered him to constantly confront questions of race and ethnicity. Understandably, India allows a conducive environment for identity rootedness while migration towards the West threatens culture loss. The salience and continuity of one's identity is largely determined by the articulation of consciousness generated by one's experiences of diaspora, the reasons for the exodus and the memory of the same. Given the dynamism of social interactions, individuals as interpretive beings and the vagaries engendered by time and space, the exiled community have established a central government body known as the CTA (Central Tibetan Administration) to ensure preservation of one's culture, customs, religious practices culminating as one's identity. Ahmad cites Gabriel Shaffer's insightful work on diaspora induced by statelessness. Statelessness thus represents the primary reason for Tibetans to depart from their homeland (2017: 36). Diaspora consciousness and the presence of Tibetan government in exile demonstrates the urgency of Tibetans to protect themselves from exogenous cultural forces but when considering identity as an embodied experience, the resistance against cultural assimilation becomes thwarted owing to individual preferences, gender, generational differences, shifts in attitudes and pragmatic concerns.

### Conclusion

The phenomenon of 'identity' cannot be understood in a vacuity of spatial, temporal and cultural contexts. It is essentially contingent upon the existent zeitgeist of times, its antecedence and its possibilities for the future. In a similar strain, identity therefore is not an abstracted/disembodied entity that requires rigorous epistemological inquiries. The Tibetan refugees of India in their tryst with diaspora identities draw their understandings primarily from their social, cultural, economic and political situatedness. The empirical narratives of the refugees further vindicates the unviability of an examination of 'identity' from the mental realms of the subjects as these narratives are holistically shaped and influenced by simply 'being-in-the-world'. The absence of consensus of meanings apropos their exilic identity underscores the ontological salience of 'being'. *Beings* in exile exercise their preconceptual understanding to apprehend further meanings of identity as they are produced, circulated, accepted or repudiated while in the flux of their everydayness. This 'everydayness' therefore becomes the site to examine lived experiences of the Tibetan refugees entailing their context dependency viz. spatiality and temporality. Heidegger's hermeneutic circle allowed for a holistic appreciation of the meanings of identity wherein bodies of work expounding on the attributes of identity were juxtaposed with the meanings of identity understood and embodied by the refugees. The quintessential elements of diasporic identity viz. religion, language, ethnicity and socio-cultural norms often assumed to sustain a coherent identity were contested when contrasting it with the accounts of the respondents. For instance, generational differences produced incompatibilities in terms of how conceptions of their homeland-Tibet is understood and envisioned. The propensity to seek epistemological and overarching theoretical essence of 'identity-in-exile' bypasses the ontic contingency of 'being-there'. Case in point, the intergenerational differences of Tibetan refugees highlight the varying modes of being which was brought to manifest by their facticity into junctures of socio-political, cultural and historical realities. Furthermore, the illusion of an objective and uniform identity adherent with its constitutive attributes is contested by the dependency on its lived realities. The idea of a stable homogeneous identity has been problematized when juxtaposing narratives from across the Indian Himalayan region. The settlement camps in Dalhousie and Dharamsala comparatively asserted allegiance for a homogeneous identity than in places like Darjeeling, Ravangla and Sonada wherein identity was found to be notional and variant. For beings in exile, their identity is continually under revision, reinterpretation and is at best provisional. Since beings and their existential structure is intrinsically characterised by their understanding, identity assumes, discloses and reveals itself in many multiplicities of understanding. Tibetan identity in exile therefore does not manifest as an objective and invariable phenomenon with reified contours but instead is derivative of the experiences of beings concerned with the meaning of identities. Metaphorically, the helical structure

of interpretation or the hermeneutic circle also represents the perpetual 'becoming of identity' as the circle of interpretation never tapers to a final and immutable interpretation. For Tibetan emigres, their perceptions of identity varies primarily because of their horizons which is derivative of temporality. Horizons are constitutive of 'ecstases' viz. past, future and present. They do not exist separately nor in any sequential ordering but is essential for the *dasein's* existential structure. Abandoning the subject vs. object methodology, the paper does not attempt to draw conclusive meanings of identity of ethnic communities in diaspora but engaged with multitudinous horizons of beings in exile, their existential structure, mattering, care and the prior horizons of Tibetan works of literature and identity which the researchers referred. The inevitable contingency of contexts and temporalities with reference to identity foregrounded motifs of survivability over allegiance to socio-political sentiments, religion or ethnic sensibilities of Tibetans. Archetypal identity markers viz. religious tenets, linguistic commonality and philosophical principles were relegated and deemed unnecessary by some respondents. These changes must be considered within broader contexts of modernity, cultural assimilation and one's socio-economic realities. Every interpretation therefore elicits a simultaneous examination of individual/group and structural concerns. To conclude, the hermeneutics of identity in exile allows for the possibilities of multiple 'provisional' representations of identity as opposed to the reductive bi-polar binaries of the idealist and pragmatic notions of identity.

### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Indian Council of Social Sciences Research for supporting the study. We are also indebted to Ms. Shristi K. Chettri who assisted in collecting valuable information for the research work.

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**RECEIVED: 08<sup>TH</sup> MAR 2022**

**REVISED: 15<sup>TH</sup> DEC 2022**

**ACCEPTED: 20<sup>TH</sup> JAN 2023**



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