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Longing, Belonging and the Politics of Naming: The Case of the Khache

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Longing, Belonging and the Politics of Naming: The Case of the *Khache*

Anisa Bhutia

In Tibet, Muslim traders and subsequent settlers from Kashmir were called *Khache*. Over the years, this term has come to acquire multiple significations. By engaging with the complex history of the group and their eventual return to Kashmir, this paper tries to uncover these very significations and how the idea of *Khache* represents a coming together of the Himalayan region (Tibet, Nepal, Kashmir, Darjeeling, Kalimpong). In their multi-layered notion of belonging, there is a strong sense of attachment to the imagined Tibet, reflecting a harmoniously lived life, while further complexities emerge from their repatriation to the ancestral land of Kashmir. Referred to as Kashmiri Muslims (loosely, *Khache*) in Tibet, and now as Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir, the confusion in identity is as much linguistic as political. We should also note that regional prefixes such as 'Tibetan' or 'Kashmiri' do not

just fixate associations with regions, but also with regimes of power and powerful agents. As such, through this article I am trying to argue for a geographically and politically neutral or at least less problematic term, *Khache*. Finally, this paper is an ethnographic examination of how different representations and regional influences can be witnessed in everyday life performances for this group, and how these ultimately shape their sense of being. In the same vein, we will locate Islam emerging as a constant and source of justification to life's trials and tribulations—as often portrayed by the analogy to *hijrat*—the journey to save one's religion.

Keywords: *Khache*, region, religion, belonging, Islam, Tibet.

Introduction

Friend: *Happy Losar, Anisa.*

Me: *Thank you, same to you.*

Suddenly I turn and ask: *Why did you wish me a happy Losar?*

Friend: *Aren't you Tibetan Muslim?*

Me: *Yes I am. But I don't celebrate Losar. I celebrate Eid.*

The above encounter was with a friend in the year 2000 when I was attending school in Kalimpong. Even as a child, the assumption that I would celebrate Losar, a Buddhist new year festival associated with the first day of the lunisolar Tibetan calendar, was something that discomfited me. The prefix Tibetan had always been a part of my identity and my answer to the question 'who are you' had always been: Tibetan Muslim, almost like an instant reflex. Eid was the only festival that my family celebrated, but I knew about Losar due to the large Tibetan Buddhist settlements in Kalimpong. The uneasiness of the conversation with my friend and the need to further clarify what I meant at that time as a child has become a more complex process of deconstruction of identity in the years that have followed.

* * *

This article tries to argue that it is critical to engage with how we name a group or community, by elaborating the case of the so-called 'Tibetan Muslims' who settled in Kashmir. Indeed, for such a people who have moved back and forth over regions (Kashmir-Tibet-Kashmir) and have a complex sense of history and identity, I argue that there should be an attempt to avoid spatially-fixating categories, as it poses problems like those which I will discuss as the paper proceeds. We should also note that regional prefixes such as 'Tibetan' or 'Kashmiri' do not just fixate associations with regions, but also with regimes of power and powerful agents. As such, through this article I am trying to argue for a geographically and politically neutral or at least less problematic term *Khache*. I believe this term absorbs the complex historicity, identity of movement, and the different relationalities of space and time that the above-mentioned community has lived. In this way I am also trying to challenge the idea of regions as politically and cartographically formed alone. Rather, I argue that they are also formed through the complex mobility of people and their social and cultural practices.

The journey for this research began in 2012 with my master's dissertation in cultural studies; I started to critically engage with the community's history and identity.

Since then, numerous visits to Kalimpong, Dharamshala and Kashmir have helped me gain insights about how these groups of people are held together or not. Many instances outlined in the following sections made me question as to how and whether at all, one could call this group a community. I realised during fieldwork that, though being spatially dispersed, there is a strong feeling of community among the members of the group. Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Srinagar, Ladakh, Nepal, and even Saudi Arabia and Turkey are some of the areas which they now call home, besides of course, Central Tibet, still, for some (Shah 2012: 51, 59; Altner 2010: 70; Rai 2010; Butt 1994: 16). Despite all these different locations, there seems to be a sense of solidarity among all the 'Tibetan Muslims' having an intertwined history with different regions of Tibet, Kashmir, and many others. At present, the most significant population of the group is settled in Srinagar, in Eidgah and Hawal Colonies, the two spaces which I frequented during my stay in Kashmir. It is important to note here that the situations for the *Khache* located in other parts of the world might not be similar to the ones that I encountered in Srinagar. The arguments in this article are based in my fieldwork in 2015 and the descriptions are locally situated in the politics of Kashmir at that time.

Based on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the year 2015 over a span of six months, the data were primarily obtained through participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of my community. During my fieldwork, I saw the complications that the movement has brought for this group in Kashmir. They formed their sense of belonging to either being a Tibetan, or Kashmiri, and most commonly, a Muslim. Amidst the many differences, one of the few commonalities that the group in Srinagar stands united for is the term *Khache*; as, when and how this very term gets translated, so do their politics. By introducing the term *Khache* to the academic discourse instead of 'Tibetan Muslims', I do not mean to say these people are not Tibetan. Rather, it is an attempt to underscore the point that Tibetan cultural habits—specifically language, food, dress, and also common nostalgia—may as well apply to people who follow the religion of Islam (i.e. not just Buddhism), people who may have more complicated histories and stories of movement. Additionally, till date, there has been no debate or discussions as to when the term 'Tibetan Muslim' came to be used. Is Tibetan Muslim a direct translation of the term *Khache*? These are some questions that need a more in-depth examination than just the history of the community. With the deconstruction and symbolic investigation of the term, I am hoping to intervene in the academic process of naming communities.

Probably, it can also be looked as a way of rethinking the different categories that this group presents—Tibetan, Muslim, and Kashmiri.

Khache: Understanding, Engaging, and Exploring the Meanings

My enquiry to understand the names used for Muslims in Tibet during my fieldwork in Kashmir attracted diverse responses. Most of the common iterations were *Lhasa Khache* or *Singpa Khache*. A closer examination of the term with my respondents on the meaning of *Khache* revealed other purposes that this word contained. Tibetan *ka* means big, and *che* implies mouth, translating to a ‘talkative person’. As the *Khache* were traders and consequently, extensive travelers, they had a lot of stories to share with the natives of Tibet; according to my analysis of the term it might be possible that they were considered particularly talkative or boastful. Further, *Khache* can be described as the Kashmiris of Lhasa, who came from Kashmir either directly, or via Ladakh. The term is also attributed to have its origin in the Persian word *khwaja* used for a respectable man, a wealthy merchant (Gaborieau 1995: 21). Thus, in the dominant discourse *Khache* primarily refers to the people who came from Kashmir.

In Tibetan there are many terms, which represent the Islamic Empire or its people. “The most important ones are *stag gzig*, *par sig*, *khrom/phrom* and *kha che*” (Akasoy, Burnett, and Yoeli-Tlalim 2011: 2-3). All these terms are highly contested and do not have only one singular meaning and they were discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century from the Mogao caves at Dunhuang (ibid). In the Dunhuang manuscript,¹ in the ninth century there was a mention of ‘Kha che’ silk but whether it meant ‘Kashmiri’ or ‘Muslim’ in general is not clear (ibid: 4). Some scholars have shown that Muslims from northern India and Nepal were also called *Khache* (Jest 1995: 8). But who the *Khache* are still remains a question. One of my respondents has noted, “some people came from Kashmir to Tibet to preach Buddhism, they also had a prefix of *Khache* to their name.” The term perhaps, meant to refer to people who were from Kashmir but coincidentally, the Kashmiris who visited Tibet were mostly Muslims. Hence, in due course of time, *Khache* became synonymous with Kashmiri Muslims. Further, it has been legitimized due to the everyday vocabulary of the people. But it is important to note here that *Khache* is a subjective term, whose meaning might differ from people to people, from period to period.

Moving on to the word *Khache*’s many associations in central Tibet’s society and culture, there are records of

the presence of the term in Tibet since the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682). It is believed that it was the Fifth Dalai Lama who granted them land to build a mosque and a cemetery (Bhutia 2016: 03; Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark 2011: 238; Butt 2005; Jest 1995: 8). The *Khache ling-ka*—the Garden of the Kashmiri—is deemed to be where the first mosque was built in Tibet (Jest 1995: 8, Altner 2010: 66). Various Muslim communities had settled in Tibet, and the most prominent among them were the Hui and the *Khache*. Altner (2011: 346) argues that Muslims in Chinese are called as Keshe, and *Khache* is perhaps a derivative of the term. Muslims were actively involved in society and even contributed to the Tibetan economy, culture and literature (Singh 2015: 8, Altner 2010: 67-68). The *nangma*, a high-pitched lilting song, is believed to have been developed by the Muslims of Tibet. Some scholars believe that it has its origins in the Urdu word *naghma* which means melody (Geoffrey, n.d: 13-19). Even this claim is contested, as some believe that the Tibetans generated it. Mr. Lobsang Samten, Senior Art Director of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts opined that, “If we look at the history, the people who performed in the court in the early days were Tibetan Muslims. Therefore, I believe there is a relation between *nangma* and *naghma*.” He named some of the *nangma* singers like Irfanlah Rehman and the first *nangma* singer named Yishi, who were ethnically *Khache*. Another important contribution of the *Khache* has been on the literature front through a scripture titled - “*Khache Phalu’s Advice on the art of living*” (Khache Phalu’s 1987). Though there are contestations on its authorship, it is a book that is known to most Tibetan households. It was initially written in the Tibetan script and Professor Dawa Norbu, credited for the English translation of the book, also believes that it was written by a *Khache* person. The word *Khache*, thus, embraces Tibetan-ness without having to spell it out as such, while also maintaining its distinct (and mysterious) character. The word *Khache* opens up possibilities for trans-regional representation and affective dimensions.

Khache and the Ummah: Coming Together of Regions

Before the 1950s in Tibet, there was no requirement of choosing a nationality and the idea of citizenship had not developed. Traders and travelers “moved as easily between identities as one did through the mountain passes” (Khan 2015: 66). As such, the trading communities such as the *Khache*, by their movement and settlement were already bringing various regions together into new geographies by their socio-cultural, narrative, and affective practices. History for this region is, thus, also connected. It is important to note that regions should

not be seen as something artificial but as an active agent shaping the social, economic and political processes of the world (Scargill 1985: 139). Further, regions are formed through its networks, relations and connections (Allen and Cochrane 2007: 1162).

In case of the *Khache* the complex historicity and geography that had formed around the community through their movements got further complicated after the Chinese invasion of Tibet after 1950s. Freedom of religion being taken away, many people moved from Tibet to other areas. The *Khache* in particular again had to move, this time towards 'their ancestral place of Kashmir'. On the route from Tibet to Kashmir, they stopped in the eastern Himalayan town of Kalimpong for around six months during the 1960s before moving on. The relocation to Kashmir was decided by the *Poonj/Panch* (five) committee,² a group formed during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama to take care of the administrative affairs of the Muslims in Tibet (Singh 2015: 05; Naik 1995: 32; Butt 1994). Most of the members of the community settled in Kashmir but some came back to the Himalayan towns of Kalimpong and Darjeeling in the Indian state of West Bengal; a sizeable number also went to Nepal. In this way, the *Khache* spread throughout the Himalayan belt. A group whose history was primarily formed by the trade routes of the Himalayan regions ultimately spread out again into all these different regions. Although the majority of the *Khache* have relocated to Srinagar, there may be some in other parts of the world as well. Like in the past, this group has settled and taken certain traits from the local culture and created an almost peculiar way of living that spans across the Himalaya from Tibet to Nepal and beyond, thus bringing together multiple regions.

The stories of movement, place making and relocation, which shaped the *Khache*'s identity, makes the history of the group a deeply connected one spanning across different time, space, and regimes. These connections have shaped the community's sense of belonging and have been sustained and performed in different forms even today. A member of the group in Kalimpong would be well aware about what is happening in Kashmir. Similarly, the people in Kashmir would know about the *Khache*'s in Nepal and these connections span further to Dubai, Tibet, Turkey, and many other places, some of which I am probably not even aware of. "We Tibetan Muslims have relatives all over. We still have family in Lhasa, Ladakh, Kashmir, and in Kalimpong and Darjeeling. It is only geographically that we are apart; otherwise we are all the same, culturally and religiously" (Sherpa 2018). Having similar sentiments, some of my respondents in Kashmir mentioned, "Now due

to strict rules and regulations from the Chinese government, it is difficult for us to contact our people in Tibet easily. Still whenever we get a chance we try to call and talk even if it is only for 30 seconds or so." The 30 second call then becomes the talking point amidst all the members of the group, almost acting like a shared connectivity for the community as a whole.

This shared connectivity gets mobilized through enactments of different functions, conversations, foods, dress, language, which create a sense of solidarity. During weddings one can see women wearing *chuba* (Tibetan dress), covering their heads with scarf and wearing *ghau* (necklace). One can almost sense the feeling of pride while my respondents reflected on their connected histories. All these are different forms of an intentional creation of a collective *ummah* (community) across different geographical and political borders which gets problematized when we try to fix them with a certain national categorization like 'Tibetan' or 'Kashmiri'. Since the early twentieth century, both these regions (Tibet and Kashmir) have experienced complex contentions, which have shaped their respective trajectories. To categorize the *Khache* as either 'Tibetan or Kashmiri', further confuses and complicates their already complex historicity. Also, to categorize them with these national prefixes denies their intentionality and agency to enact a transnational existence. This reminds us of Schneiderman's (2010: 292) discussion of the Thangmi performing multi-agent negotiations and cross border existences while also remaining 'ungoverned'. Like the Thangmi, we probably need a term that can accommodate both intentionality and agency. I suggest *Khache* could be one such term.

Messy States: *Khache* and the Fatigue of Being In-Between

The group has been represented differently over time by agents in various positions of power, privilege, and access to knowledge. Some of my own early stepping-stones in researching the community have been through works of high scholarly value, contributed by well-meaning scholars to whom I remain eternally grateful. But their representation of the community, that had once seemed innocent, started to register as highly problematic once I was in Kashmir, talking to my respondents. In the following subsection, I will try to show how. Furthermore, engaging with the highly negotiated relocation of the group to India, we will come across some more representations made by state agents during the process, which reveal a deeper geopolitical power play. The rehabilitation in Jammu and Kashmir state was not smooth and simple either. As such I

will discuss the contentious topic of 'Jammu and Kashmir state subjectship', and the discordant and often-contradictory language of representation and action towards the resettled community by the federal and central state agents themselves. This excavates the messiness of central and state-unity bringing forth the nested complications of Jammu and Kashmir region's politics.

Scholarly Representations

One of the first works on the *Khache* was by Marc Gaborieau, called *Récit d'un voyageur Mussulman au Tibet* (Story of a Muslim traveler in Tibet) (Muhammad 1973), written in French, primarily a travelogue of Ghulam Muhammad. Gaborieau also wrote the introduction to the special issue of the *Tibet Journal* (1995), published by the Library of Tibetan Work and Archives, Dharamshala, on 'Tibetan Muslims'. Here he defines the Tibetan Muslims as any Muslims who 'are in some way or other connected with Tibet', irrespective of whether they live in Tibet proper or outside. According to this definition, the Muslim settlers in Srinagar may be called Tibetan Muslims. A similar view is put forward by David Atwill (2016) who focuses on their Tibetan heritage and history of living in Lhasa 'for generations'. In effect, such lingering nostalgia of the lived life in Tibet also pervades their everyday, as I encountered and elaborate in the ensuing sections. But the romantic view of the Muslim as harmoniously and happily embedded in local Tibetan society is problematized and challenged by Andrew Fischer (2005). Siddiqui (1991) and Sheikh (1991) present a compact idea of the history of this group of people before 1959 and there-after. Another important reference is the book *Tibet and Tibetan Muslim* (2004) written originally in Urdu by Amir Ud-din Nadwi, who is a member of the community, still living in Srinagar but not in the 'Tibetan Colonies', the place where they (*Khache*) are located at present in Srinagar, Kashmir.

The definition of 'Tibetan Muslim' given by Gaborieau (1995: 3) has a nostalgic sense of rootedness in Tibet. But it does not question the complications of citizenship and belonging that the contemporary period brings forth for such transnational groups. In my understanding, the term 'Tibetan' Muslim, might suggest a peaceful Shangri-la—accommodative of the different religion in Tibet—may hold value, sentimental or otherwise, for the one who represents. But the same prefix takes on a completely different meaning when it travels to other regions and regimes such as Kashmir, together with the people represented as such. In the local Kashmiri context, the term applied to the settler in their colonies takes on a different connotation and trajectory altogether,

suggesting a different identity ('outsiders') and belonging. This complicates their integration within a society and territory that they claim and value as their ancestral land, and leads to a fragmented community life, as I will later explain. At this point, it will not be unfair to reflect, with care, on the process of naming, the privileges, interests, and even limitations of the ones who name (this surely includes me and members of the community who project particular representations that I will elaborate below), the claims that we, as scholars, make, and thus, to meditate on the messy afterlives of our own representations and produced knowledge.

The frequent visit of scholars questioning and their inconvenient categorization has made my respondents wary. During our free-flowing conversation, one of my respondents mentioned, "We are only answering you because you are one of us and look like us, we are fed up with the questions from researchers and everyone else that wants to know our history." Another respondent further heightened this fatigued spirit, almost getting irritated when I mentioned I am working on Tibetan Muslims. He retorted, "There are no Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir; if you want to study the Tibetan Muslims, you need to go to Tibet." When I first went into the field, like the aforementioned scholars, I had similar idealized notions of a cherished Tibet being lived in a harmonious community life in Srinagar. But such testimonies were the first jolts, which made me realize the underlying tensions and deeply-rooted complications that this community was negotiating in Kashmir. I further realized that the politics of identity and names resulted in fragments within the community, confusion regarding state subjectship, local popular perceptions of the *Khache* as outsiders even in their believed ancestral place. It further translated into real everyday problems such as restricted access to higher education, lack of employment, and restrictions on buying land. Let me turn to a more elaborate discussion about this in the following sections.

Ambiguity of Governance: White Papers and State Subject

"India's Traders Held by Chinese",³ read an article in August 1959 in the *New York Times* in the backdrop of a very animated dialogue between the Indian and the Chinese governments. These negotiations centered around the 129 families of Muslim settlers in Tibet, who were eventually relocated by the Indian Government and given shelter in Srinagar. One of the most critical documents that record these negotiations is a series of notes, letters, and memoranda collectively called the White Papers I and II (1959).

An examination of the White Papers reveals an important dialogue between the two emerging regional powers, trying to assert themselves geopolitically. Both the governments of China and India tried to claim the status of the group being either Tibetan or Kashmiri, respectively, their respective interest being deftly embedded in the language and names they employed. The category that the Indian state used was ‘Muslims of Indian Origin Residing at Lhasa and Other Places of Tibet for Trade Purpose’, while the Chinese negotiators claimed that they were ‘Tibetan people of the People’s Republic of China, living under the local administration for generations’. This was a crucial geopolitical moment, indeed. It was Nehru’s administration that finally clinched the negotiation, allowing them to relocate and arranged for their rehabilitation in ‘the valley of Kashmir’. Many of my respondents opined that it was the time of “*hindi chini, bhai bhai* [India and China are like brothers]”—two new neighboring republics founded on left-leaning ideals, seeking mutual co-operation) and they were hence brought back to their ‘ancestral land of Kashmir’. It may be fruitful to remember, at this stage, that since the first half of the twentieth century, Kashmir, being in a strategic geopolitical location in between Central and South Asia has been embroiled in a peculiar and bitter conflict between various contending parties including India, China, and Pakistan (Guha 2008). By claiming the *Khache* as ‘Indian Citizens’ through the narrative of their ‘Kashmiri ancestry’ and by China agreeing, the *Khache*’s ‘repatriation’ may be interpreted as a geopolitical attempt by the Indian state in its process to claim Kashmir as part of India conclusively, that is, through international bureaucracy and documents. Indeed, the repatriation allowed these Muslim families to escape religious repression, like many of my respondents mentioned, and provided the community with documentary claim of ancestry and rehabilitation in Kashmir, validated by the Indian central state. But at the same time, we note how, through these bureaucratic negotiations, the history, identity, and destiny of these *Khache* families were being (re)drawn and negotiated, through evolving categories.

In these notes and letters exchanges the term *Khache/Kachi* got systematically translated as Kashmiri Muslims in the realm of the central Indian Government.⁴ As these families of ‘Kashmiri Muslims’ were escorted into India and provided with Indian citizenship, they were subsequently allocated some land (first in Eidgah then in the Hawal neighborhood) in Srinagar, under a lease with the promise of ownership transfer after 20 years. In the public documents issued by the Jammu and Kashmir government, however, we encounter the significant addition of ‘Tibetan Refugees’, after the Indian state-prescribed term ‘Kashmiri

Muslims’. Further, while the Jammu and Kashmir civil secretary’s plot allotment sanction for rehabilitation in Sangeen Darwaza, Hawal read ‘Kashmiri Muslim Tibetan Refugees’, the public hoarding of the site for the housing colony eliminated the term ‘Kashmiri Muslim’ altogether with a declaration in bold, ‘SITE FOR HOUSING COLONY OF TIBETIAN REFUGEES, J&K Housing Board’(sic). In fact, even today, these neighborhoods that they are settled in, are locally referred to as the ‘Tibetan Refugee Colony’. There is a predominant popular perception of them being Tibetan and their colonies regarded as the places where one can get *momos* (dumplings). The resulting situation, as the reader would imagine, is one of tension and confusion.

Another important site of such contestation is the question of the ‘Jammu and Kashmir State Subjectship’, which results from Jammu and Kashmir’s special autonomous status within the Indian Constitution. It is an exclusive political identity, also called Permanent Residency, which grants people of the Jammu and Kashmir state the ownership of lands, access to higher education, jobs, and other such state privileges and has come to be regarded as proof for ancestry and origin. It is worthwhile at this stage, to emphasize the thorny relations between Jammu and Kashmir state and the Indian central government as it has evolved over decades of war, violence, and increasing surveillance and control. The volatility of the political situation and the underlying tension between regimes surfaces frequently in the everyday working of bureaucracy and government, as was apparent in the discordant language-use in the case of housing and rehabilitation that we just encountered.

The question of state subjectship heightens the politics of belonging for communities like these relocated Muslims from Tibet, whose ancestry cannot be easily established. On the one hand there is the White Paper, issued by the central India state, which confirms their Kashmiri ancestry and supports their claim to being regarded as Kashmiri. On the other, most of them lack Kashmiri State subject papers, which makes their territorial belonging dubious and vulnerable before local state authorities (Bhutia 2017). The problem then, is one of authority and legitimacy of the right to affirm ancestry and belonging, and lies at the core of the evolving relations between the local and central governments claiming stake in Kashmir. Let us consider the case in 2014, when the names of members of the community were suddenly struck down from the local voter’s list by the area’s election authority, on the grounds of non-possession of state subject papers. It came as a rude shock to many of my respondents as they and their ancestors had been casting votes since 1960s, I was

told. It was only after several rounds of explanation from several members and showing of earlier voters' lists and Indian nationality documents, that the voting rights were re-instated again by the officer. Similar confusion occurs also with the subject of the buying of land and property, applying for higher education, seeking employment in public offices, etc. Needless to say, this severely restricts social and economic mobility, and limits options to improve livelihoods (Shah 2012: 62).

Further, another such incident which shows the uncertain conditions that the group is living has been mentioned below, where one person from the community had gone to register for a ration card:

The authority who was issuing the Ration Card was from Ladakh. Being a Ladakhi, he knows that the Tibetans do not have state subject. He refused the application of the Tibetans on the grounds of them not being a State Subject... Technically speaking we do not have any rights whatsoever if it comes to us for staying here. Right now because they don't know about us so somehow we get by. Somehow we manage. Some of the students get admissions in the university to study, sometimes they ask for the state subject, and as we do not have that they show the ration card. If a person applies the law we do not have any verification. (Pervez Sheikh, 45, Male, Hawal, 16th September 2015)⁵

Like the issue of ration cards, another such incident took place in the late 1990s; when some community members were denied passports. Narrating the incident, one of the respondents, who lives near the colony mentioned, "In order to separate us from the other Tibetans who are refugees, the government had to do a survey to clarify the descendants of the heads of the family mentioned in the white paper, in order to be sure that they were handing the passport to the right people."

Further, there are continuous interactions with the Tibetan Government in Exile, formally called as Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) through the visits by the Dalai Lama to the Eidgah and Hawal colonies, and the presence of local institutions like the Tibetan Public School, *Men tsee-khang* (the Tibetan Medicine Institute, established in the form of a small shop in the local vicinity of the colony). Thus, apart from the above-mentioned categories, such interactions and engagement with CTA create an additional set of representations for this group of people. As many of my respondents hold dear the statement from the earlier visits of the Dalai Lama, "When Tibet gets free, we shall all return to Tibet." These

encounters uphold the Tibetan belonging to the community, which gets reproduced in their everyday lives. One of the most important visible representations of being a Tibetan is the Tibetan Public School located in the Hawal area within the 'Tibetan Colony'.

The different representations from different actors discussed above has shaped the group's sense of belonging and identity. The events mentioned above get intertwined with the everyday of the *Khache* in Srinagar in such a manner that poses some important questions towards the state's way of functioning. Even the state seems to be perplexed; giving them permanent ration cards during a certain period and then stopping their passports at another. It seems like sometimes the global identity of the Tibetan being a refugee gets 'projected' on this community situated in Kashmir. These different categories percolate into the community as they form groups like the Tibetan Muslim Youth Federation (TMYF) and the Sangeen Youth Federation (SYF), with the former perceived to have an attachment with Tibetan identity and the latter towards Kashmiri identity. The two groups' differing views are not in terms of history but in terms of the contemporary. Respondents from both parties agreed to the importance of their Tibetan heritage and their relation with their king, the 14th Dalai Lama. But the problem lies at present where due to unemployment and lack of better livelihood opportunities, there are frequent differences between the two groups. The underlying tensions between the TMYF and the SYF took the form of violence in 2012, which will be discussed in the section that follows. It shows the current messy state of the groups.

Crisis of Identity and Belonging: the Tibetan Public School

The Tibetan Public School (TPS) is located in the 'Tibetan Colony' at Badamwari, Hawal in Srinagar. The School is recognized and affiliated with the Jammu and Kashmir State Board of School Education. The Jammu and Kashmir state acknowledges the community's presence visibly, only during the multiple visits of the Dalai Lama. The projection of the Tibetan identity through such exchanges is what some members of the SYF group fear. Another predominant fear that exists is that of being called a refugee through the affiliation with the CTA, which would hinder their chances of becoming a state subject. Individuals who oppose this relationship with the 14th Dalai Lama and the CTA perceive themselves as Kashmiri. Thus, when the community's identity is being constructed as Tibetan, it disturbs some members' notion of the self. Following the same line of thought one of my respondents mentioned,

“We have a fear that as the naming of the school changed from Tibetan Muslim Children’s Educational Institute to Tibetan Public School, in the same way, we would also one day become a refugee.”

On the first visit of the Dalai Lama in 1975, the Tibetan Muslim Refugee Welfare Association was formed which looked after the well-being of the community. When in Srinagar, “some elderly people started imparting education and formed an Educational Committee to run the Madrasa Islamia Tibetan at Id-Gah, Srinagar.” It was through the financial assistance from the Dalai Lama and from the Tibet Fund, New York, that “a handicraft center, a co-operative shop and a school were established”.⁶ At present however, only the school exists. The TMYF was formed after the Tibetan Muslim Refugee Welfare Association and it took over the school’s management after the winter break of 1997. The school developed from a small rented building at Baripora to a three-storied building near one of the colonies. It is largely the funding and possibly the monetary gains received by few that has created rifts among the community members. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the intricacies involved and the confidence in which my respondents shared things with me, I will not be able to go into certain specific details with regards to the TPS and their funding, but I will try to give the readers an idea about the situation.

Apart from CTA, the school also received some funds from the Mongolian Tibetan Affairs Commission, Taipei. It is unclear about what happened to the funding from Taiwan, but it is believed to have stopped after the school management committee (TMYF) sent them an official letter informing them of the transfer of the management on March 1st 1997. Further, explaining the Taiwan connection one of the respondents mentioned, “In search of better opportunities many people from the community went to Taiwan, Nepal, Saudi Arabia and through these movements worked and also formed connections with the Taiwanese Government.” Additionally, he believed that the community, which was separated in the early days because of the Taiwan government, was further separated by the involvement of the CTA. A new unidentified group was formed, but in local parlance, the community refers to them as the ‘Kashmir group’, which did not believe in the ideology of the two already existing groups (Dharamshala and Taiwan). This group was working towards gaining ‘Jammu and Kashmir state subjectship’ for the whole of the community. From this unidentified group emerged the youth wing SYF. All of the members of the community largely know the presence of the three groups in the community. In the local reference, the groups represent a certain geographical undertone. They are referred to as

the Dharamshala, Taiwan and Kashmir groups. The individual forms one’s identity through the social interactions and the relations that one witnesses (Heise and MacKinnon 2010). The social interaction with the CTA and the relation with the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, possibly led to the division of the community.

My fieldwork discussions often revolved around the tensions that were already brewing in the community with regards to the divided status of being clubbed into various categories. These worries came to the surface during the two-day visit of the Dalai Lama in 2012 at the TPS, when the school was vandalized. This incident brought forth the tensions that have been present in the community since the time the school had started taking funds. The act of violence on the members of the management of the school and the school itself can be seen as the result of the concerns resulting from different categorizations. Further, it becomes essential to look at the political role of the CTA and how it has affected the community. The process of being a Tibetan and preserving one’s identity, which began in 1975 (the first visit of the Dalai Lama), had its effect to such an extent that the anxieties present within the community escalated and found an expression in his third visit to the community. The violence against the TPS is itself a representation of the violence against the Tibetan identity that some community members hold close and some who do not want to adhere to. The ‘primary’ respondents of two different groups have voiced their opinions as to how the incident unfolded, which have been mentioned below.

Some members of the *Khache* community believes that the Dharamshala group handles the management of the school, while the Kashmir and Taiwanese groups are perceived as having joined hands to overthrow the Dharamshala group. In the given account the respondent referred to both Kashmir and Taiwan groups as ‘they’:

The incident took place after the Tibetan Parliament Speaker spoke. Some group of the people started vandalizing the school building, and they called the police. They misled the police and in the end, captured the management of the school. Everyone knew I was looking after the academic programme here, and hence I was taken into police custody. But I called the Private Secretary of His Holiness, and I was not harmed at all.

Next, the Divisional Commissioner started the enquiry. We took the matter till the high court because they had bribed the *tehsildars*. During that time the jurisdiction summoned some of our management members claiming that we have stolen

control of the school and if you do not leave the school in a week's time then the case will be handled legally. (Rahim Khan, 47, Male, Tibetan Public School, 17th September 2015)

A respondent from another group (Kashmir and Taiwan) observed:

Everyone from the community was attending the cultural programme in the school. The violence broke out when someone from SYF questioned the school management to show documents about how the funds are disbursed in the school. Basically what we wanted was transparency. As they refused to reveal the records, arguments started. Next, some people who were present began breaking doors and windowpanes of the school. To resolve this dispute, the Additional Deputy Commissioner headed a committee. I reached along with some members on behalf of the SYF, and we explained our stance that we were not refugees, we were citizens, they maintained that they were Tibetan refugees, they were related to the Dalai Lama.

The Additional Deputy Commissioner passed on the responsibility to the *tehsildar* [tax officers accompanied with revenue inspectors], who proposed a community referendum be affected, and whoever gained the majority of the votes would take authority of the school. It was then that these (Dharamshala) people went to the High Court, obtained a stay order, and slapped a case for me. They do not want to vote because then the school would come in the hands of the community. And I did not go ahead because there is nobody here to take responsibility for the school. If tomorrow the quality of the school falls, it will only be bad for the community, so it is better to stay like this. I have no personal end to seek here; I do not have livelihood worries. So, I just let it be. (Naseer Shah, 50, Male, Hawal, 10th August 2015)

In the two narratives, one can see how the incident is seen from two different perspectives. Recalling what happened further, the second respondent said, "After the incident took place, the Dharamshala speaker of the parliament called me and had an interaction with me, he said that you are so weak that even after having citizenship, you are asking for assistance from us, refugees." For the second respondent, it further heightened the distinction of being different from the Tibetan, thus projecting another group.

As the community needed help, they took aid from whomever they received it, not realizing the consequences

it might have for the community later. Summing up these chaotic encounters for survival of the group in Kashmir, one of my respondents questioned the very nature of how categories are produced:

One has to be well sustained in life for ordinary men to think about humanity. When we repatriated here, we did not have any job, no proper livelihood, people were anxious. I heard that aids were coming for the community from Dharamshala and Taiwan. Some people among us opposed the idea of accepting funds and some did not. (Gulam Rasul, 70, Male, Hazratbal, 13th August)

Amidst this entire struggle for survival, some members of the community tried to achieve a uniform political identity addressing all their different categories with—Repatriated Indian Muslims of Kashmiri Origin from Tibet in the year 2005. But amidst the differences in ideological positions within the community, this group became defunct within a short period. In due course of time, these different groups brought along a feeling of bitterness within the community members, and their unresolved issues resulted in violence as encountered above. The only thing that has somewhat remained stable (though evolving through different regions) in their messy states, is their religion, which ultimately forms a major part of their survival, existence, and everyday lives.

Hijrat: Narrative of Belonging in Movement

"Hum *hijrat* karke yahaan aye (We have performed *hijrat* and travelled here)" (Saleema Sheikh, 60, Female, Hawal, 1st September 2015)

Most narratives began with the reference of *hijrat*—the emblematic religious migration—as a faithful act in itself (in this case, escaping a religion-intolerant political space in post-1950s Tibet). "Apne din ki hifazat karo (Learn to protect your religion)." The larger historical and cultural context of *hijrat* by the Prophet of Islam was frequently invoked by respondents to locate their migration and the circumstances under which they migrated. "Ab wahi baat hai, hum log *hijrat* karke aye hain (It is the same story, we have undertaken *hijrat* and we have come here)." Thus, the notion of *hijrat* has become a signifying factor in the everyday life of the community.

Another respondent, who was 60 then, owns a shop in the Tibetan Colony and used the same phrase to respond to the query on why they moved from Tibet. In his words: "Hum *hijrat* karke yahaan aye (We have undertaken *hijrat* and have come here)." He explained that as there was no freedom of religion in Tibet in the 1960s, they left

the place and moved to save their religion. It is *hijrat* as a concept, which is used by the people to make sense of having been protected from any eventuality. Talking about the recent floods in Kashmir in 2014 and the Nepal earthquake in 2015, one of my respondents mentioned:

Even prophet Muhammad had to do *hijrat* to save Islam. And the person who does *hijrat* will be saved from any unforeseen circumstances. Look at the recent floods that happened in Srinagar, did any of our community people suffer? Also, during the Nepal earthquake, lots of people were killed. Did anything happen to our community members? No, it is because we did *hijrat*, that Allah has saved us from such natural disasters.

Such was the insistence on the movement to save religion that the first mosque built was named as ‘The *Hijrat* Mosque’, in the EidGah Colony, which is locally referred to as the ‘Tibetan Refugee Colony’. During the initial years after having relocated to Srinagar, an imam from Nadwa Ulama, (an Islamic Institution in Lucknow formally called Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama) came and reminded the people that they must never forget that they had come (to Srinagar) to save their religion. There is a possibility that the only thing that has remained constant for them is their religion and that is what significantly shapes their sense of belonging. Further, the acceptance and invocation of the Islamic concept of *hijrat* allows the community to see migration as not just an external event, but a sort of spiritual journey. At present, it would not be surprising to see members of the family going to the Tablighi Jamaat, a preaching movement reaffirming basic principles of Islam, for days or even months.

Thus, we see people bring up *hijrat* as an idea that helps them cope. Further, it validates their movement from Tibet to their ancestral land of Kashmir. Their networks that span across different regions find resonance in the use of this concept to make sense of their uncertainty. The core doctrine of *hijrat* is the idea of preserving one’s religion resulting in the ultimate act of faith and sincerity towards Islam (Casewitt 1998: 114). However, such geographical movements always put their own pulls and pressures for change. Many practices that were adopted in Tibet were stopped without any explanation (Gaute 2015: 53). Religion which seemed the only thing that was constant for this group has also evolved through the local and global influences. Although the veneration and celebration of Sufi saints is a widespread practice in Kashmir, but it seems that the *Khache* have given up this traditional practice in pursuit of forging a new identity for the community.

Conclusion

“Do not try to separate the fabrics of the cloth, everything will fall apart.” (Gulam Rasul, 70, Male, Hazratbal, 21st August 2015)

When I first entered the Hawal colony, a big worn-out gate welcomed me. It was called Sangeen Darwaza. Identical houses lined together, but some had more levels than the others, perhaps an indication of the social class of the particular tenant. The geography was similar to other neighborhoods of Srinagar, but on closer inspection, you would find kids sitting on the roadside, chattering in Tibetan, while using some Kashmiri words in between. Young women walked past me in groups, wearing salwar kameez, giggling; an old woman sat on the threshold, enjoying the sun. She was wearing a *chuba*.

Entering the house of my hosts, Khatiza Kharmurah, an 80-year-old woman welcomed me in. She was wearing a *chuba* and a headscarf. Walking barefoot on the wooden floor, lined heavily with carpets of Tibetan wool, we sat down while lunch was being spread out in the adjacent dining room. As we were sitting and waiting, sipping butter tea, I asked, “Khatiza *la*, (don’t you feel hot in) *chuba*?” She smiled and replied, “Yeh toh hamara traditional dress hain na, Tibetan honey ka nishani (This is our traditional dress, a marker of us being Tibetan).” Perhaps the *chuba* and the headscarf were her ways of keeping Tibet alive in everyday life in Kashmir—the Tibet where she grew up, was being embodied and lived with here in Srinagar, I wondered. Lunch was served. As we both walked into the wooden dining room, the sumptuous spread caught my eyes. The fumes of *wazwaan* (multi-course meal in Kashmiri cuisine) mixed seamlessly with that of *thukpa* (Tibetan noodle soup) and *momo* (dumplings) in the early autumn afternoon air.

How does one write about everyday lives that are so complex and connected? Regions, regimes, religion, narratives of belonging, politics, self, identity, mingling like smoke in the afternoon air. Where does one end and the other begin? Everyday life itself is an art of existing, encounters with categories, messy negotiations, and adjustments made with one’s surroundings. As Anna Tsing (2005) would describe, and as we have seen in our case, region, religion, routines, and rules are themselves co-produced through these encounters, which ultimately shape the everyday identities and practices. There is no clear demarcation between these categories which themselves are not fixed, but in movement, as has become clear (or perhaps, unclear?) through various elaborations in the article. This makes neat categorization impossible. Calling them Tibetan may deny the performed aspirations of being

Kashmiri, claims to an ancestry, and sense of history, if not access to possibilities of dignified livelihood. At the same time, calling them Kashmiri may possibly deny a cherished Tibet, that is remembered, imagined, and performed in everyday food, language, gestures, and habits and maybe even aspired. The *Khache* may be Kashmiri, may be Tibetan, may be both or none, perhaps even everything, living here in Srinagar, or there in Lhasa, or in Nepal, Kalimpong, Darjeeling maintaining an *umamah* across regions and regimes. Words have the capacity to make worlds as they move across different time and space (Gluck and Tsing 2009: 3). Further, words move, pick up new meanings, histories, and stories. As such, as I have argued, perhaps a geographically and politically neutral term *Khache* is less problematic for representation. *Khache* is less loaded, due to its non-association with any particular center of power, as such it is perhaps more open to movement, change and more nuanced representation, affects, respectful of trans-national agencies of 'staying together'.

I need to make two admissions before I end. Firstly, I acknowledge that there are not enough voices of women in the article, as I would have preferred. The question of gender in the above discussions of representation and language is an important one and will be the subject of my forthcoming articles. Secondly, the journey of writing this article has been intensely personal and stressful. Most of the respondents I quote above are relatives and acquaintances who represent a wide spectrum of opinions and positions on these issues. As an ethnographer, a young unmarried female, I have tried my best to search, hear, and gather from the widest range of stories possible and have made a careful and honest attempt to assemble my own understanding of reality. Yet, as one who can publish her own representation, words that may reach far and wide, I put myself in a position of privilege and peril.

* * *

In the meantime, five years have passed since I have seen my childhood friend, who we met at the start of this article. He has a shop now on the 10th Mile Road in Kalimpong on the lower end, where probably many traders used to visit in the earlier days. I am in Kalimpong again. As he sees me coming, my friend gets up, and we share a cordial handshake of being old classmates. I tell him how much I miss the place and am thinking of coming back for good. We discuss business, friends (who moved away and some who stayed back), talked about everything under the sun. And next followed a conversation something like this:

Me: *Do you remember what I had asked you when we were small?*

Friend: *No. Indeed it has been long. Hey, was it about the Losar thing or Tibetan Muslim?*

Me: (With a smile in my face) *Yes, you do remember. I have a better idea now. Let me start by telling you about the history of my community.*

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Endnotes

1. The *Dunhuang* Manuscripts are important religious and secular documents that were discovered in the Mogao Caves, in the twentieth century. This manuscript consists of important works on ranging from history and mathematics to folk songs and dance. For more details: <http://idp.bl.uk>.
2. This was iterated many times by the elders of the community who gave many anecdotes like: 'One of the Poonj, (usually five members) decided to go to Kashmir as he had some relatives in Ladhakh.'
3. I came across this newspaper article and the associated quotations through Atwill (2016). Though, I was not able to get access for this original newspaper article, the reference is: 1959. India's Traders Held by Chinese: New Delhi Says Reds Detain Five in Tibet and Prevent Hundreds from Returning. *New York Times*, 12 August 1959.

4. In White Paper I, the two Notes that specifically talked about the treatment of the group as Indian Nationals or Tibetans are: Letter from the Consul-General of India in Lhasa to the Foreign Bureau in Tibet, 13 May 1959 and Letter from the Director of the Foreign Bureau in Tibet to the Consul-General of India in Lhasa, 17 July 1959. Similarly, in White Paper II there were two notes specifically on this issue: Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, 24 September 1959 and Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, 29 October 1959.

5. The names of my respondents have been changed for their protection.

6. This information has been retrieved from the document that was shared by some members from the community, which outlined a brief history of the school titled 'Tibetan School in Srinagar under Different Managements since 1960s'.

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