

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF SOUTH ASIAN MIGRATIONS

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# STATE, REFUGEES, AND FUZZY BORDERS

## Dialectics of Reciprocal Integration among Tibetan Refugees and Indian Hosts in Ladakh

*Joanna Pereira Coelho*

### Introduction

Enumeration—the transformation of a small, approximate, tentative conception of the social universe into the typical modern image of mapped and counted identities—was one of the hallmarks of colonial modernity (Kaviraj, 1995, p. 166). This distinction between pre-modern and modern societies got further enhanced with the formation of the nation-state in the former colonised societies. This chapter examines the dialectics of identity and belonging of Tibetans who sought refuge in the newly formed Indian nation-state. A by-product of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, the modern nation-state—an independent state with a written constitution, ruled in the name of a nation of equal citizens—first emerged in Europe over 200 years ago (Wimmer & Feinstein, 2010, p. 764). Since then, it has been proliferating as the major political system of the world, and in contemporary times, it has been the most prominent form of political legitimacy for the erstwhile colonies in Asia and Africa. The modern Western concept of nation, with its limited and fragile history, faces complex issues of juxtaposing the earlier nations, kingdoms, and empires with the contemporary nation-states. The former were essentially political institutions based on cultural configurations and on cultural exchanges (Pathy, 1999, p. 101). The latter however divided the world into some 2000 political units, each supposedly carrying a near-homogeneous cultural, social, linguistic and customary whole; and if they did not, maybe by persuasion, welfare, co-optation, or coercion they could be brought over to that homogeneity. The postcolonial Indian nation-state despite its staggering heterogeneity has always aspired towards homogeneity.

Despite the voluminous research on nation, nation-state, and nationalism (Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 2004), there have been relatively few studies (Giddens, 1984; Foucault, 2007) on the implications that nation-state formation has had on borders and frontiers. The emergence of the nation-state as the locus of geo-political governance in modernity reinforced the sanctity of borders. As the inhabitants moved from residents or subjects to enumerated citizens, the once fuzzy frontiers have been transformed into more permanent borders with clear dichotomies of insiders and outsiders. Borders appear as linear, spatially fixed demarcation lines between polities whereas the frontiers of pre-modern times represent zones of various imbricating and interconnecting cultural, economic, and political boundaries (Parker, 2006, pp. 79–80). Given that very often practical considerations like colonial expediency alone, without any concern for shared history, tradition, culture,

language, economy, and geography had determined the boundaries of the nation-state, it would be interesting to study the nation-state from the perspective of people living in border regions. However, regardless of the clear connection between cultures and most definitions of the nation, there has been dearth of research on the cultural construction of interstate borders (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). In analysing the reciprocal integration between Tibetans and Indians in Ladakh this chapter recognises that “cultural landscapes transcend political ones in the border regions” (Anderson, 1996). Boundaries and borders are areas or places “in between,” and therefore they embody the loci within which contact takes place (Langer & Gotz, 2020). The key idea for them is that borders not only divide, but also connect and serve as interfaces of contact, resulting in the emergence of a double consciousness on the part of those inhabiting the borderlands. Taking this thesis further, this chapter argues that borderlands are characterised by reciprocal integration. Reciprocal integration is defined as the process through which everyday voluntary exchange interactions between migrants and locals, which are returned in kind or paid forward, occur (Paunova & Blasco, 2021).

In discerning the reciprocal relations between hosts and refugees in Ladakh, this chapter is theoretically guided by the social exchange theory as it examines the agency and negotiations of Tibetans living in the border regions of Ladakh in India. The fieldwork for this chapter was conducted in the Leh and the Chanthang plateau in Ladakh in September 2019. I also interacted with Tibetan nomads working in Dharamshala in January 2023. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the above mentioned Tibetan settlements and clusters, this chapter seeks to analyse the reciprocal integration of Tibetans and Indians who reside in the contact zone of the Indian Himalayas. Particularly in the context of Himalayan studies, concepts like contact zone which Mary Louise Pratt (1991) defines as a “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” are also used to understand the transcultural connections among the different nation-states that form the border region. In this chapter interrelations among people in the borderlands are conceptually analysed by using the concepts of reciprocal integration in the contact zone.

### **The Tibetan Civilisation**

Despite its existence since prehistorical and ancient periods, circa 30,000 BCE to 600 CE, not much has been documented on the Tibetan civilisation. But even in works that historically cover Tibet (Schwartzberg, 1978), Tibet is mapped as merely peripheral to Asia’s large sedentary agricultural civilisations and not from its own central position and perspective as a civilisation in its own right. The area occupied by the Tibetans as representatives of a well-defined culture includes much of the Himalayan region including Nepal, Bhutan, upper Burma, and large portions of Ladakh, which are politically now in India (Stein, 1972). While many associate Tibet with Buddhism, it was also once a land of warriors and chariots, whose burials included megalithic arrays and golden masks (Bellezza, 2014). This first Tibetan civilisation, known as Zhang Zhung, was a cosmopolitan one with links extending across Eurasia, bringing it in line with many of the major cultural innovations of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age (Bellezza, 2014). Shakabpa (1967) believes that the first Tibetan State was established by Nyatri Tampo, a member of the Magadha noble family who was exiled to Tibet. The most important ruler was Songsten Gampo who was born in CE 617, and ruled from CE 629–649. He extended Tibet’s power right into Nepal and China. Songsten’s period is referred to as the golden age since an all-round progress was achieved, and Tibet became a powerful political and military entity, in addition to making significant strides in the fields of religion and culture as well (Subramanya, 2011, p. 17). The establishment of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century led to the further expansion of the sphere of influence of the Tibetan civilisation. The entire



Himalayan region, including the modern States of India, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar were predominantly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan language and culture. In course of time important trade connections were established between Tibet and the surrounding regions which in the twentieth century formed border regions of the nation-states of India, Bhutan, and Nepal. This in turn further strengthened the sphere of influence of Tibetan culture and civilisation in these border regions of the neighbouring nation-states. Ladakh in India is one such border region, which is so deeply embedded in Tibetan culture that it is at times referred to as Little Tibet or Western Tibet.

The influence of Tibetan Buddhism in particular, and Tibetan culture in general, in Ladakh is evident the moment one enters the Bakula Rimpoché Airport in Leh. The wall paintings found in the airport are similar to the ones found on Tibetan buildings in any Tibetan settlement. On leaving the airport and while moving through the streets of Leh, and the main market in Leh, what strikes one apart from the absolutely ruggedly stunning landscape, are the Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags, stupas, and monasteries that dot the Ladakhi hills. In fact, one could be forgiven for thinking for a moment that one is in a Tibetan settlement or even in Tibet. Given such a dominance of Tibetan civilisational influence on the Ladakhi landscape, this chapter argues that living amidst a culturally similar host society can be enabling as well as challenging for a refugee.

### **Ladakh and the Evolution of a Cultural Zone**

Ladakh, situated at 12,000 feet, is one of the highest inhabited places on earth. It served as an overland trade centre connecting various Central Asian regions, and in summer it formed a busy marketplace cum resting place, where caravans coming from different mountain passes would stop to rest and exchange goods through the barter system. Besides being the only route for transporting merchandise, these passes were veritable highways for cultural exchange, linking people representing diverse cultural groups, thus helping in furthering mutual acculturation and assimilation of thoughts (Mukherjee, 1996, p. 23). Tibet and Ladakh have similar geographic and climatic conditions—mountains, high altitudes, and a short growing season, which have encouraged transmitting each other's culture as well as the development of a culture different from surrounding regions, which can be observed from the religious practices, food habits, dress patterns, and language and script, polyandrous marriage, use of traditional scarves namely, *khatags* (Thsangpa & Raina, 2011, p. 143). For centuries, monks from Ladakh studied in Tibetan monasteries, and there was a constant interchange of both merchandise and ideas (Thsangpa & Raina, 2011, p. 139). While Tibet and Ladakh had socio-cultural and trade links for centuries, politically Ladakh has always been distinct. The Kingdom of Ladakh was founded in about CE 917 by a direct scion of the last Tibetan king. Subsequently he divided the Western Tibetan region among his three sons and Ladakh was ruled by one of them. Ladakh remained independent until it was invaded by the Hindu Dogras in 1834.

The Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950, and the escape of the XIV Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso into India in March 1959, led to an exodus of Tibetans who sought refuge in India. In exile, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile (TGiE) with the support of the Indian government and international aid agencies, established a number of settlements in different parts of India to accommodate the growing number of Tibetan refugees. Given the civilisational influence that Tibet had over Ladakh through the centuries, it was only natural that Ladakh would be one of the destinations of the Tibetan refugees. There is a Tibetan settlement, called Sonamling at Choglamsar, a few kilometres away from the main Leh market. Apart from this settlement, Tibetan nomads have also been living and grazing their crops in the Chanthang plateau in Ladakh. In this section of the chapter, I have sought to discern the social sphere of Tibetans who have sought refuge in Ladakh. I have specifically



focused upon the reciprocal integration between the Tibetan and Ladakhi nomads namely, the Changpas living in the Changthang plateau and Tibetan refugees living in Leh and the Ladakhi Buddhists.

### **Tibetan Nomads**

The Changthang region in the Indian Trans-Himalayan area of Ladakh represents the western extension of the Tibetan Plateau, an important highland grazing ecosystem (Goldstein & Beall, 1990). The Chanthang plateau in Ladakh in India extends into Tibet. While most Tibetans had to spend months trekking arduous mountains to reach the sanctuary of India, often with detours through Bhutan or Nepal, after the Dalai Lama escaped to India, along with the thousands of Tibetans fleeing to India, the Tibetan nomads too walked with their cattle across the plateau to India. Those who had lost their cattle were rehabilitated in Sonamling Tibetan Settlement at Choglamsar and were given work as labourers. The nomads whose livestock remained with them even after arriving in Ladakh settled in Changthang. The Indian government distributed the Tibetan refugee nomads in nine different settlements on the Changthang plateau. Before 2014, there was another settlement which has now been discontinued. The nine clusters are situated in different locations on the Changthang plateau. The difference between the clusters varies—sometimes the distance is around 150km, and at other times the clusters are 30–40kms away from each other.

The establishment of Tibetan settlement in regions bordering Tibet is interesting given that Pandit Nehru was reluctant to rehabilitate the Tibetan refugees close to the Tibetan border as he feared tension if they were housed too near China-controlled Tibet. The Chantahang representative, in an interview with me in September 2019, explained that the Indian government was not averse to keeping the Tibetan clusters on the same Changthang plateau:

People living in Changthang act as sentinels as they often reach areas where there are border encroachments before the army. Actually, there are many army posts in those areas but nomadic people are some of the main unofficial security guards, as they are constantly traversing the mountainous regions, They act as look outs ... If there is any kind of infiltration the nomads of Changthang are often the first witnesses. So the Indian Government is not unhappy with the relocation of the Tibetan nomads on the Chantghang plateau. It has more to do with the interests of the nation, not the survival of a few people over there.

Rizvi (1996, p. 55) mentioned that the earliest Tibetans to migrate into Ladakh may have come as nomadic herds people, after the fashion of those who still roam the bare upland plateaux of Ladakh, as well as over the border in Tibet. The Changpa, Indian nomadic pastoralists who originally migrated from Tibet in the eighth century CE graze the rangelands of Changthang (Jina, 1995). In my interactions with Tibetan nomads in Sumdo and Samye nomadic camps, I got to know that some Changpas migrated from Tibet as recently as two generations ago. The Changpa are Buddhists and share cultural and linguistic affinities with Tibet (Rizvi, 1996). With the geopolitical developments in Tibet in the 1950s, the ethnically Tibetan Ladakhis were hosts to those who sought refuge from the land of their origin—Tibet. The socio-cultural implications of living amidst a culturally similar host society can be enabling as well as challenging for a refugee.

### **Reciprocal Integration of Refugee and Host: Accommodation and Conflict**

In an attempt to preserve their language and culture which has been facing threats of Sinicisation in Tibet, the Tibetan government in exile has followed a non-assimilative policy. While this policy

of non-assimilation is maintained in areas with a culturally dissimilar host society in the Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan region, where the influence of Tibetan culture permeates into the local culture, there is reciprocal integration between the refugees and hosts. In the border region of Ladakh, which had been part of the Tibetan civilisational sphere in pre-modern times, even with the nation-state formation of modernity the fuzziness of the cultural borders between Tibetans and Ladakhis remained. Mahayana Buddhism fostered by the rising Tibetan empire, was a global attractor in Central Asia in the seventh to ninth centuries, leading to the Buddhisation and Tibetanisation of the Indo-European (Dardic) population of Ladakh and Baltistan (Zeisler, 2006). However, the nature of reciprocal integration between Tibetans and Ladakhis in the town of Leh varies from the nature of reciprocal integration between Tibetan and Ladakhi nomads.

In Changthang, the shared ancestry, Tibetan Buddhist cultural dominance and communitarian spirit both Tibetan as well as Ladakhi nomads facilitate the integrative ties between the two communities. The climatic, topographic, cultural, religious, and occupational overlap made it relatively easier for the Tibetan nomads to migrate to and settle down in Changthang, compared to Tibetan refugees in other parts of India. The remoteness of their living space as well as the harsh unpredictable climatic conditions and arid topography make earning a livelihood challenging for the nomads of Ladakh. From their livelihood of cattle rearing, they get dairy products like milk and cheese, and sell wool from sheep and pashmina from goats. The wool and pashmina from the Changthang area are some of the finest in today's commercial world. But as the nomads are incapable of preparing the finished product, they just sell the raw material to the middle men. These middle men are Ladakhi or Tibetan businessmen who come to Changthang and collect the raw material from the nomads. The Tibetan refugee nomads also keep a variety of livestock—yak is used for meat, milk (from male or the female yak) and transportation (less so in recent years), while horses are used for riding, carrying loads, and more recently for ploughing agricultural fields.

As the arid topography makes fertile land a scarce resource, there are often property disputes between the refugee and hosts. But given the collective solidarity between the Tibetan and the Changpas, the village elders sort out such disputes through mutual settlements. Of course, the unequal nature of refugee-host relations often results in refugees making the compromise and adjustments. Though the Changpa nomads are originally Tibetan, having moved from Tibet in the ninth century, over the centuries they have become naturalised as Ladakhis. Given the limited available resources since the closing of the Tibetan Changthang grazing area, and the increased number of nomads due to the influx of the Tibetan refugee nomads, at times disputes arise between the two groups. Because of the pressures on available pasture land, the Tibetan immigrants honour an agreement made in 1962 that limits the size of flocks. They may keep to not more than 25 animals per person in each family. There are no such restrictions for the Changpas. The Tibetan refugee nomads also have to pay the Changpas a certain amount of money for their livestock. In the winter, two persons from each household of local nomads count the livestock of the Tibetan refugees. They also have to pay a small tax to the locals for the use of the rangeland. The money that is collected from the Tibetan refugee nomads is used for village and monastery expenses. Sometimes disputes do arise between the two groups on account of this calculation, or due to the borders of grazing lands. The assistant camp leader of the Tibetan refugee nomad informed me that the Tibetan refugee nomads try to avoid getting into arguments with the Changpas and often are the ones to compromise, as they are refugees. He alleged that the Ladakhi nomads assign work to Tibetan nomads in return for basic facilities like food, water, and shelter. Most often, this payment is in the form of cash.

Another problem that the Tibetan refugee nomads face is that they are called by the Ladakhi monasteries to work pro bono for the monastery. The Ladakhi monasteries coerce the Tibetan refugee nomads, as well as Changpas, to rear their 200–300 goats and sheep. As the Tibetan refugee

nomads have their own cattle to rear, they resent the additional work of the monastery. But refusing the orders of the Ladakhi monastery is not always easy. The Changthang representative in Leh informed me that one of the Tibetan nomadic clusters has been requesting him to allow them to abandon nomadic life primarily because of the extra work that they have to perform pro bono for three Ladakhi Buddhist monasteries. Sometimes they are also compelled to do construction work for the monasteries. Since nomads have to keep moving from place to place, at times their current location is quite far from the monastery. In such cases, it is inconvenient for them to go and spend many days over there.

What makes it difficult for the Tibetan authorities to intervene is that these monasteries are Ladakhi Buddhist monasteries. If it were Tibetan Buddhist monasteries then the TGiE would be authorised to arbitrate. While there is a proliferation of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh, these monasteries are managed by Ladakhi Buddhists. Hence the TgiE's influence over the monasteries is limited. But on the whole, the Tibetan refugee nomadic community has relatively good interactions with the Changpas. Borderlands are "where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa, 1987). The remoteness of the life and livelihoods of the nomads of Changthang, both Tibetan and Ladakhi, in a sense isolates them from outside influences and contemporary events like demonetisation, and so on, while at the same time, strengthens the communitarian bond between refugee and host. They meet often and sometimes travel together. At times there are inter-marriages between the two groups. After all, they both share the same religion and like any other community with mechanical solidarity as explained by Durkheim, religion is a very important marker of solidarity.

The cultural similarities between Ladhakis and Tibetans should ordinarily facilitate the integrative ties between the two communities. And on some level this does take place. As seen in the case of the Tibetan refugee nomads, the climatic, topographic, cultural, religious, and occupational overlap made it relatively easier for them to migrate to and settle down in Changthang, compared to Tibetan refugees in other parts of India. However, Subba's (2002, pp. 139–141) contention is that tension is more evident where Tibetans and locals interact closely than in the more segregated Tibetan populations of South India. My interactions with Ladakhi Buddhists in Leh illustrate how a common religion, while acting as a bond strengthening solidarity, can also be a source of tension among different groups of believers.

### **Centrality of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh**

While the exact date of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet is unknown, it may be safe to presume that by the time the Tibetans assumed control of the region as early as 663, the Ladakhis, or rather the Dards that are thought to have inhabited the area, had at least come into contact with Buddhism (Luczantis, 2005, p. 66). A perusal of Tibet's recorded history also traces the growth of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh, right from the eighth-century visit of Padmasambava to Ladakh. Tibetan Buddhism has traditionally placed great importance on scholarship, and monasteries were the main sources of learning for monks, and to a lesser extent, for Buddhist lay people. Ladakh's Spituk monastery for instance, maintained a residence (khanmsten) in the great Tibetan monastery of Tashi Lhunpo, and the more scholarly Ladakhi monks went there and to other parts of Tibet for higher education and meditation training (Bray, 1998, p. 47). Meanwhile, ordinary people commonly travelled to the great pilgrimage sites of Tibet. From a religious point of view, Ladakh was very much part of the wider world of Tibetan Buddhism (Bray, 1998, p. 47).

The Head of the Ladakhi Tibetan Gompa Association (LTGA) also acknowledged this practice of Ladakhi monks going to Tibet for further studies. He informed me that earlier the monks

of the Ladhaki monasteries would go to Kashmir to study. But when Buddhism ceased to be the dominant religion of Kashmir, the Ladakhi monks began going to Tibetan monasteries for their religious training. On completing their religious education, they returned to Ladakh. The length of stay of the Ladakhi monks in Tibet differed from person to person. Some remained for a few months and others stayed on for 15 to 20 years, until they completed their Geshe (highest Tibetan Buddhist degree equivalent to a PhD) degree.

In discussions with members of the Ladakhi Tibetan Buddhist Gompa Association (LTBGA), I was informed that during 1959 many Ladakhi Buddhist monks were stationed in Tibet pursuing their religious studies. When the Chinese occupied Tibet, these monks were not aware that being Ladakhis and not Tibetans, they could escape the wrath of the Chinese. They were frightened and many of them were either killed or imprisoned by the Chinese. A few of them returned—one as late as 1984 when the Chinese realised after years of interrogation that he was from Ladakh—and there are some who are still missing.

The Ladakhi monks who returned to India from Tibet after Chinese annexation brought with them important religious texts from their monasteries in Tibet as they feared that the Communist Chinese would destroy them. They hid the religious texts in their bags when they fled to India. Many Tibetan and Ladakhi Lamas consider this one of the greatest contributions of the Ladakhi monks, as the Chinese burnt most of the religious texts in the immediate aftermath of the invasion and during the Cultural Revolution. In many instances, the only original records that Tibetan Buddhists have of a number of religious texts are the ones saved by the Ladakhi lamas. The president of the LTBGA informed me that some decades ago, the religious representatives of the prominent Tibetan Buddhist monasteries set up in South India visited their office to buy some of the retrieved books.

The extended interactions that the Ladakhi monks had with Tibetan monasteries during their study in Tibet, helped strengthen the bonds between the two communities when the Tibetan refugees fled to India. The preservation of Tibetan texts, as seen above, was one way that helped Tibetan Buddhism in exile. Another was the personage of the nineteenth Bakula Rimpoche. The LTBGA under Bakula Rimpoche established the Buddhist Philosophy School (later known as the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies) in 1959 in Ladakh. This institute not only accommodated Ladakhi novice monks; a number of Tibetan High lamas and teachers who had fled from Tibet were also employed as teachers in this institute. Tibetan novice monks also came to study here. The school was thus immensely helpful in offering a temporary abode of learning for the monks until the Tibetan monasteries were to be rebuilt in South India. Bakula Rimpoche thus became the champion for the Tibetan cause and under his leadership the Ladhakis welcomed the Tibetan refugees.

Ladakh has become a refuge for Tibetan Buddhism since Chinese religious persecution began, and is the only place where all four sects remain (Shakspo, 2010, p. 63). The setting up of Tibetan monastic universities like Sera, Drepung, and Ganden in exile in Karnataka also meant that now Ladakhis could continue their education in Tibetan monastic institutes in South India. In Drepung Loseling for instance, there is a khamsten (residential hostel for monks in a monastery) for monks from Ladakh. But Shakspo (2010, p. 102) writes that it would have good for Ladakh had the various Tibetan Buddhist schools opted to build their monasteries in one of the few historically Mahayana Buddhist regions of India, close to Tibet, both geographically and culturally. Many Ladakhi monks have stayed permanently in the monasteries in South India, causing concern among Ladakhis, since this not only draws religious students away from the region, but the climatic conditions cause trouble for those who return (Shakspo, 2010).

Ladakhis, both members of the LTBGA as well as members of the Ladakhi Buddhist Association (LBA) in discussions with me in September 2019, informed me that the presence of Tibetan

refugees has been a blessing for Ladakh: “earlier we believed in him as a guru, and a few people went to Tibet to get his blessing, but he had never come here before. Now in exile the Dalai Lama visits Ladakh almost every year.” Apart from the Dalai Lama, other Tibetan Buddhist High Lamas also visit Ladakh. However, the economic pressures, limited land usage, and so on, does create friction between the two communities from time to time. In 2014, during the ten-day Kalachakra given by the Dalai Lama in Ladakh, the LBA was in charge of the organisation and arrangements. At that time, a number of Tibetan refugees complained that they were being discriminated against by the LBA and some of their food stalls were even overturned. Among the Buddhist monasteries too, there are only a handful of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh. It is true that the Ladakhi Buddhists feel benefited by the presence of Tibetan Buddhist teachers who often visit Ladakh. But the Ladakhi Buddhist may tend to feel overshadowed by the predominant role of Tibetan Buddhist teachers. Norbu (1996, p. 87) refers to a Ladakhi intellectual’s resentment of Tibetan refugee priests controlling six important monasteries in Ladakh. A young Tibetan nomad researcher I spoke to however clarified that while the superior in charge in these monasteries may be Tibetan, the de facto control lies with the Ladakhi monks of the monastery. In the case of Tibetan Buddhist and Ladakhi Buddhists, cultural similarities may have encouraged a level of integration which places the two groups in competition, leading to a strictly maintained separation of politics and identity in both communities and in government (Rolfe, 2008, p. 265).

### **Hegemony of the Dominant “Other” in Border Regions**

While borders are a place where state hegemony manifests in its clearest forms, they are also where hegemony is most fragile (Tashi, 2014). Historically Ladakh has always been a substitute for Tibet which remained impermeable to them. It offered the closest approximation to the romanticised Tibetan Buddhist way of life; monasteries, monks, lunar landscapes, and cheery, smiling inhabitants living in harmony with nature encapsulate Ladakh in image and text (Gupta, 2012). Following the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s, the West had more awareness about Tibetan Buddhism, due to the increasing number of Tibetan monks seeking refuge in the West; at the same time, Chinese occupation rendered access to Tibet even more difficult. In the orientalist imagination Ladakh, once an outlier was now seen as the land of refuge for those seeking a slice of the Tibetan Buddhist Shangri-la. This in turn led to the hegemonic dominance of a refugee community, especially in the sphere of religion and culture. The Buddhist Himalayas have thus emerged as a contested geo-cultural landscape with the potential for adverse geo-political consequences as excessive Tibetan influence pervades institutions in the Indian Himalayan belt from Tawang to Ladakh (Stobdaan, 2019). The popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the West led to the hegemonic dominance of Tibetan Buddhist scholars and teachers in Ladakh—with Ladakhi Buddhists masters at times feeling overshadowed. As Tibetan is the language of the religious texts, it has invariably become the language that is internalised by Ladakhis. The Tibetan monastic tradition has a very strong impact on the self-conception of the Buddhist elites, and has until now hampered any development of literacy and literature in Ladakhi (Zeisler, 2006). In contemporary Ladakh, where “local” Buddhists and Muslims mostly share facilities like schools, Tibetans are the “separated minority,” whether by their own choice or through the enforcing attitudes of local populations and authorities (Rolfe, 2008, p. 265). Indeed, Ladakhis are given different treatment in education, not being schooled in their native language until recently, while Tibetan refugees in Ladakh have always been taught partly in Tibetan, in special Tibetan schools set up initially by the Indian government and latterly by the Tibetan government in exile (Norberg-Hodge, 1991).

There has been a push back to the perceived Tibetan hegemony by local Ladakhis. Muni and Baral (1996, p. 28) claim that the presence of co-ethnic refugees exacerbates, consolidates, and even politicises ethnic groups in the host country. Local Ladakhi intellectuals are now mobilising to what they perceive as the hegemonic influence of the Tibetan language. The local magazine "Ladakhi Melong" is an attempt to standardise and popularise the usage of Ladakhi for written purposes.

With Western interest in Tibet, increasing, especially after the Cultural Revolution, Ladakh and Nepal became much sought after destinations since the 1970s for those who could not visit Tibet. In the 1980s the Travel Association of Leh, later called the All Ladakh Tour Operator Association (ALTOA) was established. I have been informed that Tibetans are not encouraged to operate travel agencies. My respondent said that this was because, Ladakhis know that as tourists, especially foreign tourists are largely interested in visiting sites of Tibetan Buddhism, the presence of a Tibetan travel agency or even Tibetan tour employees would be more preferred by tourists as Tibetans would be better able to explain various facets of their religion and culture to the tourists. Hence Tibetans are unofficially discouraged from associating with the travel business. Capitalising on the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism, the tourist map lays much emphasis on Tibetan Buddhist monuments and structures. Islamic structures are invisible on the tourist itinerary though Muslims form a significant proportion of the population of Ladakh and there are a number of Islamic sites that could be of interest to tourists. Borders are critical and vulnerable geographies where hegemony needs to be constantly asserted, interpreted, and re-interpreted, for the same reasons: proximity to the Other (and its differential politics) and marginal placement in relation to national centres of power (Tashi, 2014). The interactions between people belonging to the frontier region of India and an influential refugee community apart from being characterised by reciprocal integration, is also a constant process of domination and contestation.

### Conclusion

Recapturing the problematic of the nation-state, the postcolonial states are thus composed of a multiplicity of heterogeneous cultural and linguistic groups within, whereas there is a considerable cultural contiguity across national frontiers (Pathy, 1999). The negative discourse surrounding refugees in contemporary times often arises from a perception that refugees are a "burden" to local communities, "receiving" more than they "give." While negating such a discourse, I argue that there has been reciprocal integration between Tibetan refugees and Indian hosts in the border regions of Ladakh. Not only is it challenging for Tibetan refugees to maintain the non-assimilative framework of their exile in a culturally similar environment, but there is also more hostility in refugee-host relations when there is cultural similarity with the host society. It proves that, especially in the case of pluralistic and relatively fluid non-European territories and states, the finality of categorising peoples into fixed territories and identities may give rise to its own complexities.

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