

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Disaggregating citizenship: Tibetan refugees navigating identity, belonging, and exclusionary state policies in India

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Abstract

This essay explores the struggles of second-generation Tibetan refugees under an exclusionary Indian citizenship regime. Confronted with a national orthodoxy that entwines legal status, entitlements, and national identity, Tibetans respond by “disaggregating” citizenship. First, stateless Tibetans, born in India to refugee parents, won legal appeals by demonstrating that Tibetan nationality was no bar to Indian citizenship. In response, Indian authorities demanded that Tibetans give up refugee entitlements and remove themselves from their national space and political community in exile as the price of Indian citizenship. This article explores the diverse responses of Tibetans to the citizenship-on-offer: some aspiring for it, some accepting it, and others actively rejecting it. These responses illustrate strategies refugees employ to navigate citizenship regimes that often render them liminal. Refugees act both to mitigate the precarity of statelessness and to preserve their identity, community, and political aspirations against erasure. In doing so, they not only disrupt the national orthodoxy of states that negates refugee experiences but also reveal the incompleteness and contradictions of citizenship regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari, a 24-year-old Tibetan activist, initiated a legal dispute not with China—whose rule she opposes in favor of Tibet’s independence—but with India, the country of her birth. Three years prior, she was denied an Indian passport because she identified as a Tibetan national. Lhagyari challenged the Ministry of External Affairs’ (MEA) decision at the Delhi High Court. The MEA, in turn, argued that Indian nationality was a prerequisite for citizenship. “It is stated that in an application made by the Petitioner under the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 she indicated her present *nationality* as ‘Tibetan.’ It is submitted that since on her own understanding, the Petitioner did not consider herself to be an Indian citizen, she could not be granted an Indian passport.”¹

Until 2010, most Tibetan refugees in India were governed by the Foreigners Act of 1946, regardless of their birthplace.² Like them, Lhagyari was designated a Tibetan national because she held a Registration Certificate (RC)—an identity document provided by the Indian state. However, born in India in 1986, she qualified for Indian citizenship, which was granted by *jus soli* (right of the soil) until 1987. “Nationality” was absent from the Citizenship Act. Thus, despite the MEA’s exclusionary nationalist discourse of Indian citizenship, the Delhi High Court ruled that Lhagyari’s claim of citizenship was valid:

The impugned communication dated 1st September 2009 states that the passport has been refused on the ground that the Petitioner is not an Indian national under Section 3(1)(a) CA. At the outset it must be observed that the concept of an *Indian “national”* is not recognized by the CA (Citizenship Act). The fact that in the application form for an identity certificate the Petitioner described herself as a Tibetan national will make no difference to this legal position. There cannot be waiver of the right to be recognized as an Indian citizen by birth, a right that is expressly conferred by Section 3 (1) CA.³

By asserting her right to Indian citizenship while maintaining her Tibetan nationality, Lhagyari had disaggregated what Niraja Jayal (2013) identifies as the three dimensions of Indian citizenship—legal status, bundle of rights and entitlements, and identity. These three dimensions have been increasingly “intertwined” by the Indian state, especially with amendments to citizenship law, from birth-based citizenship (*jus soli*) to descent-based citizenship (*jus sanguinis*). This was done to exclude undocumented migrants from access to citizenship (Jayal, 2013). Challenging this national orthodoxy, Lhagyari disaggregated national identity from legal status. Her success inaugurated new possibilities for second-generation Tibetans born before 1987, providing them and their descendants an avenue for citizenship.⁴

The Indian state machinery concerned with citizenship—including the Ministry of External Affairs, the Home Ministry, and regional passport offices—soon realized that Lhagyari was not the sole challenger. The Tibet Justice Center (2015) noted how, after her case, Tibetans claimed and were repeatedly being denied passports by Indian officials. In the face of these denials, Tibetan nationals filed appeals in states, including Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttaranchal, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and the capital, Delhi, in 2013–17 (see *Tenzin Choephag Ling Rinpoche v. Union of India, High Court of Karnataka, W. P. No. 15437/2013*; *Karma Hozer Rabten v. Union of India, High Court of Sikkim, W. P. (C) No. 47/2015*; *Lobsang Wangyal v. Union of India, High Court of New Delhi, W. P. (C) 3539/2016*; *Tenzin Tselha v. Union of India, High Court of Delhi, W. P. (C) 7035/2015*; *Tenzing Choden Sherpa Alias v. Union of India, High Court of Meghalaya, W. P. (C) No. 206/2015*; *Doma Tsering v. Union of India, High Court of Meghalaya, W. P. (C) No. 206/2015*; *Jampa Chomphel v. Union of India, High Court of Uttarakhand, W.P. No. 2032/2015*; *Karma Gyalsten Neyratsang v. Union of India, High Court of New Delhi, W.P. No. 6074/2014*; *Namgyal Dolkar v. Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, High Court of Delhi, W.P.(C) 12179/2009*).

Given the success of appeals, the MEA issued a legal memorandum in 2017, granting Tibetans born in India before 1987 the right to citizenship. However, it did so conditionally: if Tibetans took up Indian citizenship, they would have to leave their settlements and lose access to the benefits, institutes, and facilities of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).⁵ The policy used another dimension of citizenship—rights and entitlements—as a tool to reenforce the national orthodoxy. This introduced a con in the citizenship-on-offer—promising enfranchisement to India while sacrificing rights, identity, and community entitlements acquired as Tibetan refugees.

By capturing the varied ways in which Tibetan refugees respond to the citizenship-on-offer, this article argues that refugees, who inhabit the margins of citizenship regimes, must contest the exclusionary policies that deny them rights and status on account of their identity. They do so to both mitigate their precarity and to preserve their identity against erasure. By disaggregating citizenship in different ways, second-generation Tibetans challenge the restrictions of India's citizenship regime. Furthermore, their actions reveal the incompleteness of citizenship offered by nation-states like India, which promises more than it delivers.

Under the present global order of nation-states, lacking citizenship restricts almost every aspect of life. Nevertheless, second-generation Tibetan refugees' responses to India's citizenship offer vary, across accepting it, aspiring for it, and rejecting it. These are complex decisions, including considerations of material survival, access to resources, national belonging, and ongoing claims to political sovereignty.⁶

This article considers responses of second-generation Tibetan refugees—born between January 1950 and July 1987—toward Indian citizenship. The Tibetan position best detailed in scholarship is the rejection of South Asian host-nation citizenship, marking commitment to Tibetan sovereignty (DeVoe, 1987; Goldstein, 1978; McGranahan, 2018; McConnell, 2011, 2013, 2016; McLagan, 1996; Roemer, 2008). Fewer studies have considered what the 2010 court case—and the subsequent law enforced by the Indian state—meant for Tibetans and what it revealed about the Indian state (Jayal, 2013; Lin, 2022). This article considers ethnographic evidence to contribute to both these conversations. In understanding the political position of refugees, this article also emphasizes what Diana Allan (2013, 21) has called the “local pragmatics—individual and communal—of survival, identity, and continuity,” wherein differing social positions of Tibetan refugees promote different responses to Indian citizenship. Their choices must simultaneously consider the political commitments and economic and existential conditions with which refugees contend. Regarding Indian citizenship, Tibetans articulate different ways of navigating their Tibetan national identity, as well as aspirations toward independence (*rang btsan*)⁷ or autonomy (*dbu ma'i lam*) of Tibet.⁸ In the cases described, Tibetan refugees demonstrate how even entirely opposite positions toward Indian citizenship—wholesale rejection or fighting to acquire it—can both be undergirded by political commitments.

This essay is based on thirty months of fieldwork in India, between 2017 and 2023, focusing on Dharamsala (the Tibetan exile headquarters) and the Tibetan settlement in Bylakuppe. During my fieldwork, I interacted with a broad spectrum of individuals, including activists, bureaucrats, artists, journalists, and students.

THE REFUGEE IN CITIZENSHIP REGIMES

Following the World Wars, citizenship came to represent a changing world order (McGranahan, 2018, 335). While promising equal civil, political, and social rights through membership to a nation (Marshall, [1950] 1983), citizenship also became a site of state power (see also Foucault, 1997; Kauanui, 2017; Lazar, 2016). At the same time, it also became a site of resistance (Fraser, 2000; Holston, 2008; Scott, 2009), refusal (Alves, 2019; McGranahan, 2016a, 2018; Simpson, 2014; Weiss, 2016), and claims making (Alvarez et al., 1998; Bobick, 2017; Castle, 2008; Fraser, 2000; Rosaldo, 1994).

By the 1990s, anthropologists began to study how new notions of “citizenship”—affected by globalization, transnational migration, and the spread of communication technologies—were challenging the premise of citizenship as bound to territory. This gave rise to new sociopolitical configurations, such as diasporas and transnational communities (Appadurai, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Friedman, 1994; Kearny, 1995; Ong, 1999; Verdery, 1998), which enabled forms of

“long-distance nationalism” (Anderson, 1993; Glick-Schiller and Fouron, 2001) and deterritorialized national formations (Basch et al., 1993). Untethering citizenship from territory, these demonstrated evolved forms of sociopolitical status, from “dual citizenship” by post-Soviet states (Verdery, 1998) to “transnational kinship” of Haitian immigrants, sustaining monetary and ideological commitments to the future of family and nation (Glick-Schiller and Fouron, 2001).

However, the aforementioned populations’ movements were motivated by the flow of global capital, favored by the global order of nation-states (Rockefeller, 2011). Noel Salazar and Alan Smart (2011) note how states create “regimes of immobility,” wherein certain forms of migration are encouraged—businessmen, tourists, students—and others are discouraged and/or criminalized—undocumented migrants and refugees. Thus, expansion of citizenship included certain people while continuing to exclude others.

The sovereign power of the modern states rests as much on enforcing these exclusions as it does on delineating belonging (Agamben, 1998, 2005). The state’s preoccupation with “the ordering and disciplining of mobile people” (Scott, 1999) renders a category of people liminal—those who move despite states’ intentions. For instance, Sara Shneiderman’s (2013) concept of “border citizens” illustrates how states create new categories to accommodate and monitor populations. Similarly, Sarah Smith and Heide Castaneda’s (2021) study on Chuukese migrants reveals “graduated citizenship,” where individuals have visa-free US entry but lack full citizenship rights. States also resort to complete exclusion and persecution, as with undocumented migrants (Andersson, 2014; De León, 2015; Sadiq, 2008). Moreover, ethnographies reveal how populations challenge statist designs in a variety of ways, including escaping the political control of the state (Scott, 2009), subterfuge (De León, 2012; Sadiq, 2008), or acquiring citizenship and/or representation despite the state’s motives (Asad, 2023; Galli, 2023; Sadiq, 2008).

Among populations rendered liminal, refugees and political asylees occupy a distinct position. Liisa Malkki (1995, 516) has shown how the “national order of things”—the organizational and conceptual frameworks used to categorize and manage populations—both “secretly displacement, as well as prescribes correctives for displacement.” These “correctives” include systems, policies, and laws that confer refugee status, provide “relief,” and provide a pathway to citizenship. This experience often involves refugee “wait”—an institutional and existential condition of waiting for rehabilitation or political emancipation through citizenship (Adhikari, 2021; Brun, 2015; Haas, 2017, 2023; Rotter, 2016). However, while “wait” conditions correctives in the Global North, countries in the Global South, where most refugees reside, often have policies (or the lack thereof) that keep communities in protracted and intergenerational statelessness.

India—not a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol—is an example. The Indian citizenship regime is particularly hostile to refugees (Chatterji, 2007; Chimni, 1994; Zamindar, 2010); most remain ineligible for citizenship. Natasha Raheja (2022, 538) has shown that the state fails to recognize Pakistani Hindu refugees as Indian citizens, despite their “conditional recognition as national subjects.” Farhana Ibrahim (2020) finds that Pakistani Hindus who are granted legal status find themselves insufficiently integrated into the nation. Second-generation Tibetans face the opposite situation: while they have the right to become Indian citizens by birth, their Tibetan national identity has been used first to disqualify them from citizenship and then to force a choice between belonging to the Tibetan community and becoming an Indian citizen.

TIBETAN REFUGEES IN INDIA

Despite India’s long, albeit complex history of ethnic plurality, India does not allow legal integration of Tibetan refugees through citizenship, even as it permits their pursuit of a collective future. Tibetan refugees in India find themselves in the “gray zone,” a space that blurs lines between “the stranger, the victim, the criminal, and the undocumented visitor” (Appadurai, 2019). This liminal category emerges from a documentary regime enforced by the RC—an identity card required for Tibetans to legally reside in India. This card undergirds the state-refugee relationship.

Following the Tibetan uprising of 1959, the first generation of Tibetan refugees were given RCs on arrival in India. The RC provides limited opportunities to work and study, as well as open bank accounts, obtain driver’s licenses, and

live in Tibetan settlements. A Tibetan refugee's stay in India requires RC renewal every five years (it was annual until 2012). This document exemplifies the state's reluctance to formalize pathways to citizenship. Despite India providing Tibetan refugees with land and facilitating the establishment of educational, social, and political institutions, their legal status remained amorphously defined by the Foreigner's Act of 1946. Not possessing or renewing an RC renders Tibetan refugees "illegal," leaving them vulnerable to imprisonment and/or refolement. Thus, the RC also enables state surveillance of the refugee population.

The issuance of RCs on arrival persisted until 1979. In 1980, India restricted RC issuance to children of Tibetan refugees born in India, aimed at discouraging new arrivals. However, the Indian state overlooked surreptitious procurement of RCs by newly arriving Tibetan refugees (Kaufman, 2009; Tibetan Justice Center, 2015). The influx of Tibetans in the late 80s, following a series of uprisings in Tibet, prompted India to enforce stricter policies. By the early 1990s, the Indian state, alongside the Tibetan government-in-exile, advocated voluntary repatriation, making it almost impossible for newly arriving adult refugees to procure RCs. From 2004, RCs were no longer issued to new arrivals. They were replaced by "Special Entry Permits" (SEPs). SEP categories comprised students (permitted for the duration of study), pilgrims (for three to six months), and a general category (without fixed duration) which was rarely granted. Grounds for special entry did not include fear of persecution or threat to life, which characterizes refugee flight (see United Nations, 1951).

Therefore, Tibetan refugees in India are divided into two groups: those possessing RCs and the undocumented. As Tarangini Sriraman (2018) points out, documentary regimes invite "deep immersion" of the state into marginal spaces, in this instance through frequent and compulsory interactions with the state. Before gradual digitization, starting in 2015, my interlocutors described the renewal process as not only time consuming but also degrading, characterized by day-long waits for bureaucrats, only to be told to return on a whim. This is a form of refugee "wait" in the Global South—one not premised on the hope of return or rehabilitation but experienced as a form of governmentality. This wait is compounded in the context of the Identity Certificate (IC), a travel document in lieu of a passport conferred to RC holders. The IC can take months and even years to be approved, frequently arriving long after dates of travel have passed. For displaced communities spread across nation-states, international travel is crucial for maintaining their transnational formation. Tibetans have lost scholarships, missed visiting family, and significant events like births and deaths. They find themselves repeatedly expending effort and financial resources traveling to the MEA office, Delhi, to procure an IC. During the process, they can face demands for bribes, often exceeding what they can afford.

The IC extends the scope of discrimination from the national to the international scale, as it is often unrecognized at foreign ports of entry. Tibetan exile parliamentarian Tashi⁹ told me that he sought an Indian passport in part due to the humiliation he had experienced at ports of entry—notably, during his travel to Latvia for the 2019 World Parliament Convention "If I wish to travel outside, and represent Tibet, I wish to travel with some amount of dignity and I don't want to be looked at as a criminal or a second-class citizen." These constraints motivated some second-generation Tibetan refugees to seek Indian citizenship.

However, the Indian citizenship framework, initially based on birthright, underwent its first major amendment in 1987—requiring that one parent be Indian. By 2004, the mandate extended to both parents. These changes sought to exclude refugees and migrants from citizenship. This was exacerbated by the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act, particularly targeting religious minorities by requiring documents like birth certificates, which many Indians lack (Chatterjee & Raheja, 2020).

These changes have made Indian citizenship available to only those Tibetans born in India before 1987, and subsequently, their offspring. Yet, until 2010, there was no legal record of eligible Tibetans actively seeking citizenship. Scholars read this refusal/rejection of Indian citizenship by eligible Tibetan exiles largely through three lenses: the desire to return to Tibet; an assertion of Tibetan sovereignty; and the coercion of the exile state, which wanted to retain a Tibetan citizenry for the legitimization of their movement (Choedon, 2018; DeVoe, de Voe, 1983; Hess, 2006; McConnell, 2016; McGranahan, 2018; Roemer, 2008). Jessica Falcone and Tsering Wangchuk (2008) and Pia Oberoi (2006) highlighted another angle—the issue of Indian officials repeatedly denying passports to Tibetans. These rejections remained out of the public record due to the absence of legal appeals. Along with the explanations above, the

conditions of Tibetan exile in India are also germane. During the first fifty years of exile, most Tibetans lived in subsistence, lacking knowledge of Indian languages and depending on the Tibetan government-in-exile for rights and resources from India. Additionally, the second-generation Tibetans were often too young and/or confined to their settlements to act without the support of the government-in-exile. It was only after 2010 that Tibetan appeals to Indian courts opened a pathway to citizenship.

This “movement of law” marks a particular moment in Indian legal history. The “movement of law” is often understood through processes of “colonialism, religious missionization, independence movements, global legal imperialism, and borderless multinational economies” (Nader, 2002). Anthropological insights also reveal how those marginalized and excluded from formal political arenas engage with the state, employing “political societies” to negotiate with the state (Chatterjee, 2004) and collectively “roar” as political performance to drive change (Mitchell, 2023). The Tibetan example highlights an instance where those labeled noncitizens have motivated transformations in governance structures by leveraging legal mechanisms. Even though Tibetans are a fraction of the world’s most populous country, their efforts disrupt the prevailing national orthodoxy. The state responded, as noted above, by placing conditions upon the citizenship-on-offer. The subsequent section explores diverse positions Tibetan refugees hold toward this offer, disaggregating the three dimensions of citizenship—status, rights, and identity—based on their unique sociopolitical positions and experiences as refugees in India.

IT IS JUST CONVENIENCE

Like Namgyal Dolkar, Woeseer was born to Tibetan refugee parents in India. However, she was born in the sixties, during the early years of exile, in a remote settlement in Northeast India. She has lived much of her adult life in Gangchen Kyishiong, the precincts of the CTA in Dharamsala. GangKy, as it is known, houses the Tibetan parliament, the monastery of the state oracle, various cultural and administrative buildings, and housing quarters for members of the CTA. Between 2014 and 2015, I lived in GangKy as a student of the Tibetan language. That’s where I met Woeseer.

Woeseer was deeply embedded in her community. Her house was flooded with relatives and friends, some visiting, some seeking temporary refuge. These entanglements were cultivated through care and immersion in the social world of Tibetans and were an integral part of her sense of being Tibetan.

When I’d visit Woeseer, she would often cook *rajma chawal* (red kidney beans and rice) for me. *Rajma* is a staple in North Indian households. But what made Woeseer’s preparation special was that she remembered my delight when I tasted it on previous stays, and she took great care to prepare it when I visited. This care that she showed to me was an extension of an ethos of care in Tibetan settlements. Migrating communities from Himalayan regions create “webs of belonging” that “keep people at once beholden to, and endeared to one another” (Craig, 2020, 10). These “webs of belonging” both mitigate the precarity of statelessness and collectively cultivate Tibetan social worlds in foreign lands.

During lunch on March 11, 2018, Woeseer’s house was uncharacteristically empty. Afterward, we retreated to Woeseer’s terrace garden. She introduced me to the plants she had nurtured with great care, through their Tibetan or Hindi names. Our conversation turned to Woeseer’s older sister, Pema. Pema had a vivacious personality, an unabashed boldness coupled with style and glamour—a sharp contrast to the quiet charm of Woeseer. Woeseer affectionately called her “hero-nie,” a colloquial pronunciation of heroine that you hear in North India.

Pema had recently emigrated to Canada.

“Would you go to Canada to visit your *acha*?” I asked. I knew Pema’s departure would have affected Woeseer.

“No, it is too expensive.” She paused but continued, “Besides, I like it here.”

For Tibetans without Indian passports, international travel often meant spending time, effort, and money they did not have to spare. However, Woeseer, by her birthdate, could legally obtain a passport. I asked her if she had applied for it.

She whispered, “The Tibetan government has told us that if we take up Indian citizenship, we will lose our jobs.”

The Tibetan government-in-exile had previously dissuaded Tibetans from taking up Indian citizenship, fearing it will dilute their movement and identity as Tibetan nationals (Falcone & Wangchuk, 2008; Hess, 2006; McConnell, 2013, 2016). However, after the legal changes implemented by the Indian state, they asserted that individual Tibetans could choose to acquire Indian citizenship. However, not all Tibetans found this genuine and felt implicit pressure from the government-in-exile. What Woesser was articulating was both the government-in-exile's implicit coercion and its complicity in the Indian state's memorandum. Both Woesser and her husband worked for the exile state. She was deeply unhappy with this clause. It seemed unjust. "The prime minister (*srid-skyong*) also has a green card and so many of the cabinet members have citizenship of some country or the other," she lamented. "It is just convenience (*di stab bde tsham gyi ched du yin*)," she said, about acquiring an Indian passport.

"Convenience" indicates that obtaining an Indian passport could improve refugee life but would not compromise Woesser's identity as a Tibetan national. For Woesser, her Tibetanness was not at stake. She was comfortable with a hybridity of engagements and possibilities. Her identity, culture, and tastes were transformed by the migratory experience of her community (Glick-Schiller, 2021). Her love for Hindi movies and shows and her enthusiasm for Indian food persisted alongside her expertise in Tibetan medicine, her knowledge of Tibetan folklore, and her brilliance as a cook of Tibetan cuisine. Her articulation of national belonging was informed by being Tibetan in India. Thus, legal status was just "convenience"—an easing of the precarity of statelessness that had resulted in intergenerational disenfranchisement.

What Woesser articulates here is a "feeling citizenship," which is "socially and politically recognized in the everyday life of the community" and exists as a "bond" within the community (Simpson, 2014, 173). "Feeling citizenship" is difficult to strip away through legal status. It is cultivated through understandings of one's own genealogy and built in relation with others. It remains outside the control and circumscription of sovereign power.

Like Namgyal Dolkar, Woesser, too, was disaggregating legal status from national identity. But unlike Namgyal Dolkar, she was compelled to remain stateless because of the conditional offer of Indian citizenship. What did those mean for Woesser? Woesser and her husband were employees of the CTA, and their livelihood depended on remaining RC holders. Woesser's children attended Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV), schools in exile aimed at preserving Tibetan language and culture. These institutions are vital for instilling national identity and cultivating a sense of nationalism (Hess, 2006; McConnell, 2009). Additionally, her family lived in the staff quarters at Gangkyi. That was her home. They were integral members of the community and had helped grow the institutions they were affiliated with. How could she risk losing it all?

This risk varies across second-generation Tibetans in India. For some, it was possible to give up the RC on account of personal wealth and/or lack of reliance on exile state facilities. Those Tibetans who had broken away from the exile state, or whose families had moved to India before 1959, did not have Woesser's barriers in procuring Indian citizenship. However, many second-generation Tibetans were also in Woesser's position—whose economic and existential entanglements with the Tibetan exile community made Indian citizenship impossible.

Additionally, for many marginalized communities without access to formal political processes, legal citizenship does not provide equal access to rights and entitlements (Alves, 2019; Chatterjee, 2004; see also Holston, 2008). These populations, including Tibetans, depend on political communities and representatives to negotiate with the state. The conditions for Indian citizenship laid down by the MEA were therefore demanding more than just surrendering entitlements. They were also asking Tibetans to sever ties with the political representatives who acted as mediators between them and the Indian state.

For Woesser, the benefits of citizenship did not measure up to removal from community. However, while Woesser aspired for the "convenience" of Indian citizenship, there are those who do not see it as affording much convenience.

This featured in my conversation with Sonam and his sister, Tsering. The three of us were at Nechung Café in Dharamsala in summer 2023. Sonam and I had been friends for many years. He had come to Dharamsala from the Tibetan settlement in Sumdho, Ladakh—a high-altitude region where people engaged in nomadic herding—and was pursuing his PhD at an Indian university. He frequently visited his family in Ladakh.

In contrast to Woeser, my conversations with Sonam revolved around Tibetan politics. Sonam was firmly committed to Tibetan independence, a stance that opposed the moderate demand for autonomy advocated by the CTA. As we discussed the resistance movement, Sonam shared that there had been a noticeable rise in the participation of Tibetans in local elections in Himachal Pradesh, of which he did not approve.

Curious, I inquired about Sonam's and Tsering's settlement in Sumdho. Sumdho lies on the margins of India, both geographically and economically. The Tibetans in Sumdho are primarily pastoralists, presenting a stark contrast in socioeconomic status to those residing in Dharamsala, or more populous Tibetan settlements in Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh. Upon my mentioning the prospect of Indian citizenship, Tsering responded with amusement, indicating that it was not a consideration for Sumdho's Tibetans. Acquiring citizenship held little practical value, as they lacked financial resources to purchase land. Instead, they continued to utilize land leased to the Tibetan government-in-exile.

For Sumdho's residents, obtaining Indian citizenship would not enhance their material well-being or day-to-day lives. Their reliance on land provided by the Tibetan government-in-exile—combined with their modest economic status and traditional way of life—left them largely immune to the lure of Indian citizenship.

INDIAN CITIZENSHIP AND TIBETAN POLITICAL FUTURE

For many Tibetan refugees, loss of entitlements and withdrawal from the Tibetan community seems too high a price for citizenship. However, making this decision factors not only the "convenience" of citizenship but also the impact on the Tibetan political cause. This became evident when second-generation Tibetans were briefly granted the right to vote from 2014 to 2018.

In response to court judgements in Delhi (2010) and Karnataka (2013) granting citizenship to second-generation Tibetans born before 1987, the Election Commission of India (ECI) issued a directive empowering eligible Tibetans to vote in Indian elections. This directive was issued even while passport offices across India continued rejecting Tibetan applications. While reasons for the misalignment among the different organs of the Indian government are beyond the scope of this essay, this revealed the discontinuities in the citizenship regime.

The ECI's 2014 directive was significant, granting second-generation Tibetans a voice in the country where they reside. Some viewed this as an opportunity to advocate for the Tibetan cause with the Indian state (Soumya, 2014). Many second-generation Tibetans cast votes in elections of their home states. However, while the ECI permitted Tibetans to vote, the MEA remained committed to preventing easy access. After the issuance of the 2017 memorandum, the Indian state mandated that Tibetans must forfeit RCs and related benefits to be eligible to vote. This created a dilemma, with many choosing to return voter IDs.

This illustrates the trade-off Tibetan refugees face between their national identity and access to Indian citizenship. As I show below, some forgo citizenship to preserve their Tibetan identity, while others accept it to gain a political voice and further the Tibetan cause globally.

Scholars have noted this latter viewpoint, with Tibetans in the West leveraging citizenship to uphold Tibetan sovereignty claims (Hess, 2006; McGranahan, 2018). In India, however, Tibetans were encouraged to stay stateless to strengthen their collective identity, support the exile government's legitimacy, and to continue the Tibetan freedom movement (McConnell, 2013, 2016). More recently, while the CTA issues necessary certificates to those applying for citizenship, many feel an implicit coercion to not take up Indian citizenship.

The pressure from the exile state and the economic conditions of their lives become reasons for many eligible for citizenship to remain stateless. This experience of persistent statelessness and precarity has influenced migration to the West. This trend is bolstered by the notion that the Global North affords what are perceived as "strong passports" (Lin, 2022) and that Tibetans will be able to act as "ambassadors" for the Tibetan cause (Hess, 2006).¹⁰ The migratory trend is coupled by the decreasing arrival of Tibetan refugees due to China's strict border policies following the 2008 Tibetan uprising. Furthermore, recent conflict between India and China—the 2017 Doklam standoff and 2020 Galwan

Valley clash—have also strengthened Indian border regimes. Added to these geopolitical complexities, most Tibetans arriving since the 1990s haven't been able to secure an RC, entrenching their precarity. This, coupled with the allure of better prospects and citizenship in the West, is driving migration from India. Consequently, the diminishing population in India has engendered fears about the future of the community among those who remain in India.

Dwelling on these dynamics and their impacts, Wagden tells me the only way to overcome this erosion is if the CTA and India collaborate to make Indian citizenship more accessible. Wagden works for Tibet Watch, a human rights watchdog monitoring the People's Republic of China's (PRC) policies in Tibet. Despite having lived in India for over twenty-five years, he remains ineligible for Indian citizenship under the current law, having fled to India as a youth. It is his dedication to preserving a Tibetan identity and a Tibetan national future that prompt his endorsement of acquiring Indian citizenship:

The CTA discourages Tibetans to get the Indian passport. It is fine if their plan would work. But it doesn't because Tibetans migrate abroad. They don't see a future in India, because they do not have any legal status. If today my RC expires and I go to renew it, and if they were to say we won't do it, then what am I going to do? Legally, I have no guarantee. That's why Tibetans move abroad. If Tibetans get an Indian passport, at least those living in India, be they second generation, third generation, they won't lose their identity. But someone who settles in the West, maybe in the first generation is fine, but second and third generation? They will only remember that their grandfather was Tibetan. There won't be a community, they will be scattered everywhere. Then what will happen after twenty years, after fifty years? So at least if they get a legal status in India, they will not migrate. The struggle will remain here, and the Tibetan people will remain here. Otherwise, when the Dalai Lama dies, Tibetans will move abroad and then what will happen to all these institutions?

Wagden centers the pragmatic value of getting citizenship in India motivated by his commitment to the Tibetan cause. Unlike him, Tenzin Tsundue, his friend, and among the best-known Tibetan activists in exile, rejects Indian citizenship. Tsundue was born in India before 1987. He received his education at a Tibetan Children's Village and his higher education at Indian universities. His Hindi flows gently, clear, and crisp. His Tibetan is fast, unhalting, poetic. His house is known as Rangzen Ashram—a hybrid term coupling the Tibetan word for independence (*rang btsan*) and the Hindi word for a spiritual retreat (*ashram*). It teems with Tibetan activists, journalists, students, and intellectuals. On its walls are images of the Dalai Lama and Gandhi, covered in offerings of white scarves (*kha btags*). Around these, the walls present a palimpsest of the Tibetan movement, adorned with countless photos, posters, and writings. They serve both as memorials to those martyred and imprisoned in pursuit of freedom, and as testaments to the ongoing struggle. Tsundue, a committed political ascetic, leads a frugal life and travels across India campaigning for Tibet. He is also a poet. But unlike his teachers—Indian poets Dom Moraes and Adil Jussawala—Tsundue always writes about exile, loss, and longing. He was born in a roadside camp to refugees employed in constructing Himalayan roads. He longs to return to a home he has seen once—when he boldly crossed into Tibet and was imprisoned for it. He was released to Indian officials on account of his RC. In that border crossing, a stateless Tsundue refused the constraints of border and citizenship regimes in staking a claim to his nation, even at the cost of imprisonment.

Tsundue rejects Indian citizenship. He'd rather remain stateless than take up legal status. A vociferous independence advocate, his refusal is overt and outright: "What if we were all to take up Indian citizenship? How would we fight for Tibet?" He advocates for this when he visits Tibetan settlements in India.

Wagden and Tsundue's positions are repeated by Tibetans who choose to take up Indian citizenship and those who reject it. While Tibetan public forums were caught in this debate, it did not seem to greatly affect relationships internal to the community (Kumar, 2017; Younten, 2013). Lhagyari has won multiple elections and is among the youngest serving members of the exile parliament. Tsundue promoted her candidacy, and she is an ardent supporter of his campaigns. Both took different stances toward legal status, but neither doubted the other's commitment to the Tibetan cause or their identification as Tibetan nationals.

A few years after returning from my fieldwork stint in India, I was chatting with a Tibetan Settlement Officer via WhatsApp. He informed me that the number of Indian passport holders was steadily increasing, but those procuring passports aren't revealing it. He did not provide reasons for the secrecy, and I did not ask him. There are no public records to determine which Tibetans have obtained Indian citizenship; therefore Tibetans, as a liminal minority in India, are exercising the "right to opacity" (Glissant, 2009) by choosing not to disclose their status. This allows them to navigate the complexities of belonging, identity, and legal status in a way that resists assimilation into a system that does not accommodate their political realities.

In the next section, I explore the "right to opacity" as a means to challenge state-imposed narratives that efface refugee realities. I demonstrate how second-generation Tibetans resist statist impositions by subverting categories of legitimacy used to define them.

NOT CITIZEN, MERELY A PASSPORT HOLDER

"Isn't it racism?" Jamphel asked me. I spent many evenings in his hillside room, enjoying his company and the visitors sharing his studio apartment. A few glasses of Old Monk, the popular Indian spiced rum, usually elicited impassioned reactions to political issues affecting Tibetans: "When we take up citizenship abroad, in the West, they are okay with it, even happy. They believe that is how we will keep the movement alive, by having some sort of a political voice in the West." The "they" was the CTA.

Jamphel was born before 1987 in India and had lived his entire life there. He was a journalist, working for the English language version of *Tibet Express* (bod kyi bang chen), a Tibetan daily. Like Tsundue, he had studied in Tibetan schools and Indian colleges. Like many Tibetan refugees born in India, he was multilingual, but Jamphel had a particularly poetic flair for languages. He would switch between English, Hindi, and Tibetan, with an occasional sprinkling of Punjabi. His singing, in any language, conveyed the passions of a native singer. Jamphel's family comes from Nangchen in Tibet, and his siblings are scattered in the West. Only he and his elderly mother live in India. He emphasizes that he is at home in India and does not sympathize with those who despair over their lives there. However, his political identity is unwaveringly Tibetan.

"But isn't it racist if they tell us don't take up Indian citizenship but you can become a citizen of the United States? If you can be Tibetan-Canadian, then Tibetan-Indian should also be possible. How is taking up Indian citizenship meant to be giving up being Tibetan?"

Jamphel felt resentful of the CTA's implicit pressure. He was independent of their resources and facilities, so that did not factor in his decision. His dedication to the Tibetan cause was unquestionable, yet societal debates and government pressure caused him distress.

In 2020, just before the pandemic, Jamphel was to accompany a Tibetan artist on a European tour. He was excited about it. He informed me that he had procured an Indian passport for the tour.

I asked him, "Are you an Indian citizen now?"

He seemed irritated by my question. He said, "Ask the Home Minister. Anyway, who cares?" He changed the conversation to his travel plans. "My IC had expired and was lost for the past seven and a half years. That's why I made a passport—because it is quicker. An IC could take two years to make. At least I can travel now."

In saying "Ask the Home Minister," Jamphel refused to answer my question, and in saying "Anyway, who cares," he refused the premise of the question itself. He doesn't care for the question, so why should I care about the answer, and why should anyone? Indeed, the only people for whom the question is relevant, Jamphel asserts, is the state machinery, as embodied satirically in the Home Minister, who in his quip becomes the chief and nitpicky enumerator of legal status. His words "Who cares?" turn away from the categorizing gaze—of both the Indian state, and of the anthropologist—who have not known statelessness. Jamphel's is both an "epistemic refusal as well as an ethnographic one," where he refuses to concede the terms through which his political subjecthood is construed (Shange, 2019).

During fieldwork, I frequently encountered Tibetans' refusal of the "citizen" label, preferring to use "IC holders" or "passport holders" instead. This opacity is a form of "simply refusing the gaze, of disengagement" (Simpson, 2014, 106–07). Second-generation Tibetans choose instead to recast political vocabularies to reflect their refugee experiences—as lives governed through documents and yet unaccounted for by the prevailing citizenship regime. By referring to themselves as document "holders," Tibetans refuse the terms on offer and instead recast statist vocabularies to reflect their experience (see also McGranahan, 2016b).

A few days later, I broached the topic of citizenship again. Jamphel responded:

"I just got a document to travel. Simple as that."

CONCLUSION: BEYOND CITIZENSHIP

Among Tibetans eligible for citizenship, some publicly claim it, some aspire to it; others reject it or advocate its acceptance for championing the Tibetan cause. Some Tibetans exercise the "right to opacity"—a form of refusal of both the categories of the state and the anthropologist. These varied positions reflect a commitment to a political subjectivity as Tibetan refugees and acknowledge the historical and cultural barriers that prevent a smooth transition into citizenship.

That many eligible, second-generation Tibetan refugees continue to deny citizenship also exposes the incompleteness of the Indian citizenship regimes. Partha Chatterjee (2004) distinguishes between "civil society" and "political society" in explicating Indian democracy. The marginalized, lacking access to civil forums, negotiate with the state for basic needs through a "political society." This also impacts noncitizens like Tibetan refugees. Acquiring Indian citizenship does not guarantee rights; rights often depend on navigating political networks (Björkman, 2021). Thus, for Tibetans, the loss of a representative community can pose a significant challenge.

Intergenerational statelessness and precarity have led to an increased migration of Tibetan refugees to the West, where they face different challenges in acquiring citizenship. Carole McGranahan (2018) has noted that Tibetan refugees must "perform a convincing Tibetan identity" to satisfy Canada's asylum criteria. Officials often demand refugees to embody statelessness and victimhood to authenticate persecution claims. As Shahram Khosravi (2010) illustrates in his powerful ethnography, seemingly irrelevant details can result in asylum denial. Furthermore, refugees endure temporal and existential experiences of "waiting" (Adhikari, 2021; Brun, 2015; Haas, 2023; Rotter, 2016), which do not always conclude with citizenship. Even when it does, refugees can find themselves in situations of unrelenting poverty and underdevelopment, a scenario exemplified in Eric Tang's (2015) study of Cambodian refugees in the Bronx hyperghetto.

Khatharya Um's (2017) concept of "refugitude" highlights the enduring experience of refugees—asserting that the "conditions and consciousnesses of being a refugee often outlasts the expiration of the politico-legal status." For Tibetans in India, as with many other refugees around the world, legal status falls short of being the panacea it is purported to be. Citizenship regimes continue to be partial, racialized, and discriminatory, promising and yet preventing access to institutions and resources. Refugees, as a population rendered liminal, must confront additional layers of exclusionary violence.

At the same time, the condition of being a refugee also requires surviving, rebuilding, and forging community. Tibetans have created a transnational political system, institutes of culture and education, and continue to build their community through care and shared resources. Through these acts, Tibetan refugees convert settlements from sites of displacement into spaces of national belonging. In their persistence, refugees resist erasure and claim the experience of their transmigratory lives. Their actions not only reveal the hollowness of citizenship regimes but also stand in defiance to the global hegemony of the nation-state system.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Namgyal Dolkar v. Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, High Court of Delhi, W.P. (C) 12179/2009*, 5, emphasis mine.
- ² Some Tibetan politicians, diplomats, aristocrats, and businesspeople, those residing in India prior to 1950, and those who reject the exile government had gained citizenship prior to the 2010 verdict (McGranahan, 2018).
- ³ *Namgyal Dolkar v. Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, High Court of Delhi, W.P. (C) 12179/2009*, 13, 15, emphasis mine.
- ⁴ Several articles have placed the number of Tibetans born in India between 1950 and 1987 at around 50,000 (Chari, 2014; Sehgal, 2014). This does not account for their children.
- ⁵ The memorandum issued by the MEA included:
 - A) TR (Tibetan refugee) will surrender the Identity Certificate and/or Refugee/Registration Certificate (RC) at the concerned Passport Seva Kendra (PSK)/Passport Office where the application is submitted along with other documents.
 - B) (procedural instructions) In cases where RC is surrendered at the PSK/PO, these will be sent to the FRO/FRRO by the concerned RPO/PO for cancellation. IN case of ICs, the same will be sent to the concerned RPO for cancellation.
 - C) (procedural instructions) When IC or RC is surrendered at the PSK/PO, TR applicant would be issued a Certificate by the concerned RPO stating that the RC/IC No. dated...has been surrendered on...by Shri.... Consequently upon his applying for an Indian passport.
 - D) TR should not be staying in any of the designated Tibetan Refugee settlements nor enjoying any CTA benefits or subsidies after receipt of an Indian passport (Government of India, 2017).
- ⁶ The displacement of refugees across different contexts impacts their articulation of their identity and political futures (Feldman, 2018). Tibetan refugees often adopt the citizenship in the West, reflecting this difference (Hess, 2006; McGranahan, 2018)
- ⁷ I have used Wylie transliterating of Tibetan script throughout the text.
- ⁸ Tibetans adhering to the Tibetan government-in-exile remain politically divided across two stands—Tibetan independence or autonomy. The Tibetan government-in-exile has been officially renamed the Central Tibetan Administration since 2012.
- ⁹ The names of several interlocutors have been changed to protect their identity.
- ¹⁰ Citizenship regimes are multiscalar, hierarchical, and racialized. The passports of nations of the Global South do not have the same currency as passports in the Global North.

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