Tibetan and Himalayan Studies in India: State of the Field and Possible Future Trajectories

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Abstract

Tibetan Studies has not followed the same trajectory in India that it has taken in the Global North. It has largely remained an exilic endeavour, with some support from the Indian state, and flourishes mainly in the form of Buddhist Studies. We use the term Tibetan Studies more as shorthand for the scholarly study of Tibet's history, politics, geography, religion and cultural traditions as they might have unfolded in various spaces within India and not as an identifying term for an existing field. In this paper, we show that the course of Tibetan Studies in India has been affected by geopolitical relations between India and China and the refugee status of Tibetans. Because Tibetan Studies in India has developed primarily within the exile Tibetan spaces there, an essentialised construction of a homogenous Tibetan identity prevails, precluding a more holistic approach to the study of Tibetic peoples of the Himalayan region. While presenting an overview of the state of the field of Tibetan Studies in India, we also outline a possible direction for an integrated Tibet and Himalayan Studies, applicable particularly in the Indian context, taking into account the changing empirical and geopolitical situation globally that necessitates a timely conceptual and practical intervention. It also considers the inclusive scope of Himalayan Studies to recover and restore long-overlooked historical and ethnographic material from the Tibetan borderlands, which include but are not limited to the Indian Himalayan or trans-Himalayan regions.

Keywords: *Tibet; Himalaya; Tibetan Studies; Himalayan Studies; Indian Himalaya*

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Introduction

Tibetan Studies is conventionally understood as a branch of area studies that focuses on the interdisciplinary study of Tibetan history, politics, and culture. In this paper, we move the discussion of Tibetan Studies as area studies from its genesis in the West (Europe and North America) to interrogate how the study of Tibet and the Himalaya has taken shape in India. While several studies (Anand 2007; Lopez, Jr. 2018; Shakya 1994) address the state of the field in the West, the same attention has not been given to Tibetan Studies in India, some notable exceptions notwithstanding (Chandra 2021; Dash 2017; Namgyal 1964; Sankrityayana 1960; A.C. Sinha 1976; N.C. Sinha 1983, 1987). In describing Tibetan Studies in the global context, Shakya (1994) outlines the following approaches: missionary view, traveller's view, diplomatic view, journalistic view and social scientific view. This summary of approaches provides a useful reference point to undertake a similar study in the Indian context.

In India, academic and cultural engagement with Tibet has largely remained an exilic endeavour (see Chawla 2024), with some support from the Indian state, and Tibetan Studies has flourished mainly in departments of Buddhist Studies (Gohain 2024).[1] As a result of Tibetan Studies developing primarily within the exile Tibetan spaces in India, an essentialised construction of a homogenous Tibetan identity has become dominant (Brox 2012; Korom 1997), precluding a more holistic approach to the study of Tibetic peoples of the Himalayan region. Furthermore, the course of Tibetan Studies in India, as elsewhere (Barnett 2021; Dorjee 2021; Katz 1983; Klieger 1986; Shakya 1994; Yi 1983), has been affected by the region's geopolitical considerations, most notably relations between India and China and the refugee status of Tibetans vis-a-vis Indian citizens (see Note 7).

The Indian Himalayan Buddhist communities in Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh inhabit areas that are geo-strategically important in India's border dispute with the People's Republic of China (PRC), yet have been marginal in the national cultural imagination. Many of these Himalayan Buddhist communities have historical and cultural connections with Tibet through trade, religion or political ties. After the annexation of Tibet by the PRC and the subsequent border war between India and China in 1962, the Himalayan communities on the Indian side were

integrated more tightly with Indian political and economic networks, and their histories and identities subsumed either under an overarchingly Indic framework or under the history of cultural Tibet. While substantial scholarly output builds on emic epistemologies coming from within these Himalayan communities, especially since the 1990s, there is no institutional structure yet to reflect or provide a pedagogic platform or research opportunities for such scholarship. Our discussion is not only timely in terms of promoting a more equitable scholarship but also ethically desirable for the recovery and restoration of long-overlooked historical and ethnographic material from the Tibetan borderlands, which include both Tibetan and Indian people from the Himalayan region.

Methodology

The two authors of this paper are academics engaged for a decade or more in the teaching and research of Tibet and Himalayan Studies, and the paper draws on the empirical and theoretical insights gathered from their long-term engagement with the field. The authors teach at private universities in north India, and have taught, both individually and jointly, interdisciplinary courses on Himalayan histories and Tibetan exile in India. Swati Chawla was first interested in Tibetan exile through studies in migration and citizenship, particularly in the context of the partition of India (1947). Her M.Phil. work focused on Tibetan national culture within monastic and museum spaces. When she started scouring the archival record for evidence of Tibetan migration into India in the postcolonial period before 1959, she encountered correspondence from Sikkim, which her knowledge of South Asian history previously had not indicated. Swargajyoti Gohain could not ignore the deep political, cultural and religious ties that existed between Tibet and the Indian Himalayan region during her ethnographic research in the eastern Himalayan states of India (Gohain 2020, 2022) and eventually came to her current project on Tibetan educational institutions. The historical but often overlooked connections between Tibet and the Indian Himalaya partly form the motivation for this paper to call for an inclusive scope for the field of Tibet and Himalayan studies.

This paper draws on material from eight virtual interviews and three email interviews conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown

in India (2020-21) with eminent scholars engaged in pedagogical training in different institutes. We selected interviews as a method of our study in order to present the history of Tibetan Studies in post-independence India from the point of view of researchers who have been actively engaged in this field and could offer specific and informed responses regarding challenges and possibilities. The interviewees were selected for their experience and breadth of expertise in the research and pedagogical practice of Tibetan Studies. We interviewed both members from the Tibetan exile community and Indian scholars based in institutions in India and in the Global North.[2] We also conducted an extensive review of secondary literature on the state of the field and reviewed the curricular structure in a number of educational institutes offering Tibetan Studies in India. In our interviews, we inquired about the following issues: the contemporary state of the field of Tibetan Studies in India, how it evolved in the decades after India's independence and why it did not develop to the extent that it did in Western Europe and North America. We asked which academic disciplines dominated the field and why, focusing on the paucity of language training among academic programs in India in general and the lack of opportunities to study Tibetan outside of university spaces. We also asked how Tibetan Studies was impacted by the 14th Dalai Lama's six-decades-long exile in India and the subsequent establishment of settlements, monasteries and academic institutions, and if and to what effect had there been a blurring of lines between scholarship and advocacy in academic approaches to Tibet. We then asked about existing and potential overlaps between Himalayan and Tibetan Studies in India and if these were specific to India. Relatedly, we asked how scholars in India could more productively understand the interconnected histories of India's Himalayan regions, such as Ladakh, Sikkim and Tawang, for example, and of India's relations with Bhutan and Nepal. Finally, drawing on work that questions the centrality of the nation-state model and territorial sovereignty in disciplines such as history and international relations, we asked our interviewees if they believed Tibetan Studies could be repositioned within integrated programs like Tibet and Himalayan Borderland Studies in the Indian context.

In the following sections, we first present an overview of the beginnings and contemporary state of the field of Tibetan Studies in India, and then we analyse the role of geopolitics, national security,

Buddhism and citizenship discourses as factors in influencing the direction of scholarship on Tibet in institutional spaces in India. We further show how a deficit in Tibetan language training on the part of Indian scholars on the one hand, and an exile public scholarship and advocacy on the other have impacted the formation of robust scholarship on Tibet and its borderlands. We conclude by pointing to a possible direction for a more integrated Tibetan Studies by situating it within the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan/ borderland studies in India.

Missionary and Colonial Interest in Tibet

The academic study of the religion of Tibet has a precursor in the work of Jesuit missionaries who visited Tibet in the seventeenth century. Their efforts to translate the Bible led to a commitment to mastering the language and cultural idioms and a highly scholarly approach in their writing.[3] These missionaries influenced the scholars engaged in Oriental studies of Sanskrit to extend their repertoire to the Tibetan Buddhist canon and illuminate its links to Indic texts. While Orientalism after Edward Said (1978) has come to mean essentialised and stereotypical constructions regarding the non-West, it loosely overlapped with Asian Studies in colonial India, with scholars proudly embracing the label for themselves (Inden 1986: 404). The disciplines which constituted the core of Orientalist discourse were the various branches of philology and textual study, and Sanskrit and Buddhism were the focus of such Orientalist studies in nineteenth-century colonial India (Inden 1986: 406). While most Orientalist scholars initially perceived the religion of Tibet as a corrupted, degenerate form of Buddhism and referred to it with the pejorative label 'Lamaism', they later adapted their views following increased exposure to the learned monks of Tibet in the early twentieth century, foremost being the 14th Dalai Lama (Lopez, Jr. 2018; Shakya 1994).

The British colonial state in India patronised studies on Tibet as a matter of governance and statecraft; the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta was a centre for the production of knowledge about Tibet. British Indian officers posted in Tibet, such as Charles Bell and Samuel Turner, learned the language, as did the early missionaries. Linguistic competency was part of colonial officers' training; they learned the Central Tibetan dialect and were often

tutored by monks from Sikkim, Ladakh and Darjeeling who had spent time in Tibet (McKay 1997). Some officers in this elite frontier cadre produced original scholarship on Tibet based on their proximate interactions with the region and the people (Bell 1924, 1931, 1946; Richardson 1945, 1962). In addition to officers of the frontier cadre, there were also other scholars at the time interested in linguistic studies, who researched the other regional dialects of Tibet as well, such as by interviewing Tibetans coming into Kalimpong and Darjeeling. In the early twentieth century, growing internationalism and interest among Indians in lost Sanskrit literature led many, such as Rahul Sankrityayan, towards Tibet. The tradition of diplomatic writing in the colonial period produced the first histories of the region (Shakya 1994). Some of the pioneering scholars on Tibet in that time were Indian, such as Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917), whose dictionary remains one of the standard dictionaries for Tibetan to date.

Orientalist interest in Tibet declined in the postcolonial period, although a few names stand out as exceptions. The polyglot scholar Lokesh Chandra, who was attuned to the Royal Asiatic Society tradition of Orientalism, deserves special mention here. He is also the only Indian scholar interviewed by the Oral History of Tibetan Studies Project (see Chandra 2021). Chandra's scholarly interest in Tibet was informed by cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union.[4] In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was instrumental in the re-publication of annotated editions of Tibetan manuscripts, some of which were sponsored through Indo-Russian collaboration and made available to libraries and scholars alike.

Another important scholar, Zahiruddin Ahmad, proficient in Chinese and Tibetan, was among the early ones to consult Tibetan sources about the Tibet-Ladakh frontier (1970s-1980s). He wrote widely on Tibet, translated the history of Tibet and wrote a biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Tsering Shakya, personal interview).

In the immediate postcolonial period, Indian officials in the region mostly continued to draw on the legacy of colonial-era scholarship and terminology amid the political turmoil in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands in the 1940s-60s, which inhibited new empirical research on and sustained studies of the languages of the region. Indian diplomatic scholarship about Tibet remained reliant on British knowledge categories. Indian leaders in the early years after Independence, such as Vallabhbhai Patel, B.R. Ambedkar,

Jayaprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia, talked about the Tibetan issue from a humanitarian angle (Tenzin Lekshay, personal interview), but the institutionalisation of the discipline of Tibetan Studies, broadly defined, only began with the setting up of departments such as the Department of Indo-Tibetan Studies in Visva Bharati in Santiniketan, West Bengal.

Institutionalised Beginnings and Visva Bharati in Santiniketan[5]

The institutional foundation of Tibetan Studies in modern India was arguably laid by Rabindranath Tagore when he envisioned Santiniketan as a meeting place for the languages and cultures of India. Tagore invited the French Indologist Sylvian Levi (1863-1935) to Santiniketan (West Bengal) in 1921, and in 1954, the Department of Indo-Tibetan Studies was established there to 'promote research on age-long cultural relations between India and Tibet' (Loseries 2010: 58–59). From its establishment through the 1980s, the department invited Tibetan Buddhist monks, many of whom had come into exile in the 1950s, to collaborate with Indian scholars (Dash 2017; Loseries 2010). As the examples below illustrate, monks from Tibet performed yeoman's service in shepherding the discipline of Tibetan and Himalayan studies in India as teachers, translators, and administrators.

Among the Tibetan lamas who helped build the department was Chimed Rigzin Rinpoche (1922-2002), popularly known as C.R. Lama, a non-celibate Tantric master in the Nyingma tradition who served as the first head of the department (1954-1987) and helped build its manuscript and xylograph collection with manuscripts he had brought out of Tibet (Dash 2017). C.R. Lama was the first Tibetan to hold such a position at an Indian university and was part of the delegation that met Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at Visva Bharati during the latter's visit to India in 1956, accompanied by Nehru himself. Another illustrious Tibetan scholar who served at Santiniketan was Lama Chimpa (1923-2011), born and educated in Inner Mongolia before moving for further monastic studies to Beijing and subsequently to two important Geluk monasteries in Tibet—Kumbum and Drepung. (Drepung along with Sera and Ganden are the 'great three' Geluk monastic universities of Tibet.) Lama Chimpa came to India in 1951 and subsequently taught Tibetan language and

literature at Visva Bharati from 1962 until his retirement in 1993 (Das 2022; Gerke 2000; Kravchenko and Zaitsev 2003; Tan 1999). Another Tibetan lama, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, was born and studied in Golok in Amdo. Following the political upheaval in Tibet, he came to Sikkim in 1957 and moved to India in 1958. He taught at Lucknow University (1967-76) and Visva Bharati (1976-80) before moving to the United States in 1980.

The Contemporary Practice of Tibetan Studies in India

Tibetan Studies can be found practised in five kinds of spaces in contemporary India. The first is traditional monastic spaces of the Tibetan exile community, which include the three Gelug monastery seats in south India: Sera, consisting of Sera Jey and Sera Mey colleges; Drepung, with its two colleges of Jangtse and Shartse; and Ganden, consisting of Gomang and Loseling. These monasteries, modelled on their namesakes in Tibet, were re-established in exile in the rehabilitated Tibetan refugee settlements in Karnataka in south India after 1959 (Dreyfus 2003). The different colleges of these universities all adhere to the Gelug sect but strictly follow different textbooks, each composed by authors from the mid-fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries.

For example, the curriculum at Sera Jey includes courses on traditional Buddhist philosophy through the study of five main treatises: Valid Cognition (Pramana), Perfection of Wisdom Studies (Prajnaparamita), Middle Way (Madhyamika), Monastic Discipline (Vinaya) and Phenomenology (Abhidharma). Apart from this primary Buddhist philosophy curriculum, a broader education programme started under the Dalai Lama's patronage, made extracurricular subjects such as language, general science and humanities available to monks. Prayers, rituals and ceremonies also form a major part of the monastic curriculum. Ritualised debate cuts across the two programmes of philosophy and ritual, since monks studying in these monastic universities are expected to regularly conduct Buddhist debate (*rtsod pa*) or verbal argumentation accompanied by stylised gestures on matters of philosophical doctrine (Lempert 2012). Several monasteries in the Indian Himalayan region, such as Gaden Rabgye Ling monastery in Tawang, Hemis monastery in Ladakh and Key monastery in Spiti, also offer a monastic education.

The second space where Tibetan Studies take place in India, is constituted by several Buddhist institutions of higher learning established by the exile administration. Examples of these non-monastic spaces include the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, and the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education in Bengaluru. In 2017, the latter received approval to offer regular undergraduate degrees in the arts, computer applications, commerce, business administration, history, politics and environment, apart from B.A. degrees in Tibetan language, Tibetan literature and Tibetan culture.

While the institutions mentioned above are directly patronised by the Tibetan government-in-exile, Tibetan and Indian Himalayan scholars—both lay and monastic—have pioneered Tibetan Studies within central universities funded by the Indian (Union) government. These state-supported universities form the third category of institutions offering Tibetan Studies covered in our study, and include the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), Sarnath; Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS), Ladakh; the relatively new Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies (CIHCS), Arunachal Pradesh and the Sikkim state-government sponsored Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (Chawla 2024; Gohain 2024). CIHTS offers degree programmes in all academic disciplines, leading up to M.Phil. and Ph.D. programmes; the Ph.D. programs are offered in Buddhist Studies and in Tibetan medicine. In 2017, CIHTS started offering Masters degrees in Tibetan language and literature and has also established courses in Tibetan fine arts (Vice Chancellor Geshe Ngawang Samten, personal interview).

The fourth space, namely other Indian universities such as the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, Visva Bharati in West Bengal and Nalanda University in Bihar, include papers or subjects on Tibet offered by individual faculty and faculty/student research projects on Tibetan philosophy, literature, history, international relations, and others. They do not have a cohesive or comprehensive syllabus on Tibetan Studies.

Our fifth category comprises non-university spaces run by the Tibetan or Indian governments or NGOs, focusing on Tibetan policy, culture, traditional arts and education. These include policy institutes and archives such as Tibet Policy Institute (TPI), Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre (TPPRC), Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA), the Norbulingka Institute in

Dharamsala, Tibet House and the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) in Delhi, among others. Research on Tibet is also conducted in non-teaching research institutes such as the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) supported by the Ministry of External Affairs, India. Many of these institutes were established with very specific aims. For example, TPI was established as a thinktank within the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in 2012 with the idea of converting the existing research and analysis wing of CTA from a body that transcribed and disseminated writings produced within China into a monitoring cell that would look into what is happening inside Tibet and be a 'voice of the voiceless' (Tenzin Lekshay, personal interview). The institute aims to educate not only Tibetans but also the international community of Tibetan scholars, policymakers and politicians on the one hand, and the Chinese on the other. It also aims to act as a pressure group. With the setting up of TPI, there has been an increased effort to boost independent research; in that light, TPI started the Young Indian Scholar conference series in 2020 and has encouraged researchers to pursue M.Phil. and Ph.D. projects on such topics as environment, education, policy reform, gender and infrastructure.

Tibetan Studies in India: Dominant Tropes and Influences

What are the concepts and categories through which scholars in India have studied Tibet and Tibetans? What factors have influenced the shape of Tibetan scholarship and policy research here? In this section, we outline some of the dominant tropes of Tibetan Studies in India and analyse the background and context for their dominance, and highlight the limitations of these scholarly foci.

Geopolitics

Geopolitics is primary to understanding developments in the Himalayas. State-making activities, military territorialisation and border tensions have shaped issues and policies regarding environment, cultural identity and language. Critics have highlighted the power knowledge continuum in area studies—which was primarily a post-World War II development related to America's military interest in foreign cultures (Powers 1955)—wherein rich, powerful world nations are in a position to create and authoritatively speak about,

and sometimes, on behalf of, other nations. As Anand (2007) points out, Orientalist stereotypes guided much of the scholarly research about Tibet as 'geopolitical exotica.' However, area studies has also helped to de-parochialise Europe and North America by creating and disseminating knowledge out of world regions other than the West. Centres and institutes for Tibetan Studies, South Asian Studies or Latin American Studies in the West, by allowing the subaltern to speak through the voices and texts of researchers from these regions, have produced alternative 'geographies of knowledge' (van Schendel 2002).[6]

Geopolitical factors have shaped, to a large extent, Tibetan scholarship in India (Davis et al. 2021).[7] Tibetan identity in exile has rested on constructing Tibetan-ness as the opposite of everything that can be associated with China. The image of the violence-hating, environmentally conscious, peaceful and spiritual Tibetan is contrasted with the aggressive, ecologically destructive and religion-abhorring stereotype of communist China. The exile community in India has participated in the construction of an image of Tibet as pure and exalted, which contrasted with the image of China as debased in what Lopez (2018: 18) terms the 'play of opposites.' Western countries, and the United States, in particular, were motivated by their ideological opposition to Communist China, to back these stereotypical representations of Tibet and China. This further served to promote their Western interests in and Western say over Tibetan matters during the ideological war with communism (Goldstein 1991; Lopez, Jr. 2018). The cultural construction of this kind of a Tibetan national identity, albeit in exile, is an extension of the Dharamsala-based Tibetan government's political opposition to what is widely perceived as Chinese colonialism in Tibet (Anand 2007). According to historian Siddiq Wahid, Tibetologists in India, such as Lokesh Chandra, were influenced by Tibetans who only 'painted the Chinese as fire-breathing dragons,' which was detrimental both to Tibetan Studies as a field of scholarly enquiry and to the Tibetan political cause. Scholarship on Tibet, in the disciplines of political science and international relations in particular, has been impoverished by this 'black and white image of China' (Siddiq Wahid, personal interview).

The Chinese spectre has determined what can and cannot be taught as Tibetan Studies in India in a different way. Sensitive to what the Chinese state might perceive as encouragement to Tibetan

nationalism, the Indian state has desisted from starting programmes explicitly titled Tibetan Studies. Thus, while departments and centres promote Japanese, Korean and Chinese studies, for instance, Tibetan Studies remains subsumed under centres of China studies in many universities of India.

National Security

In the aftermath of the 2020 military standoff in Galwan Valley in Ladakh in northern India, Wahid noted that most commentators in the Indian media were from the Indian Army, not the foreign services and diplomatic corps, and added that India needed to build more capacity on the Himalaya among the former. 'Ladakh is as quaint to them as the American Midwest,' he said, and added that it was 'important to have the Himalayan people among the highest echelons in India' (Siddiq Wahid, personal interview). A small step towards this capacity building was introduced by the Indian Army in 2021, when, for the first time in its postcolonial history, it initiated a course in Tibetology for its officers to enable them to have a better understanding of Tibetan history, culture, language and topography (Chawla and Balasubramaniam 2021). The Army linked up with different educational institutions in the Himalayan region, such as the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies in Arunachal Pradesh, to offer this training.[8]

Although Tibetology courses advance knowledge about Tibet and its borderlands, they point to the dominance of the security paradigm in Indian epistemological approaches to these border areas. The dominance of the security perspective in Tibetan Studies, and also in allied fields of China Studies, has blocked off other modes of knowledge accumulation knowing. Academic IR expert Sonika Gupta compared the absence of a dynamic relationship between academics with area studies expertise and the bureaucrats in the foreign policy department in India on the one hand with the close synergy that exists between the Department of State and area studies scholars in the United States on the other. Armed with linguistic and field training, the latter often go on to careers in foreign policy. She pointed to 'suspicion' of academics in the Indian government as a possible reason and added that successive governments in India have not considered academic expertise useful in guiding foreign policy (Sonika Gupta, personal interview).

Security concerns prevailed with regard to Tibetan Studies in Indian institutional settings, which were additionally beset by ideological and disciplinary divisions. In the Jawaharlal Nehru University, for instance, Tibet was taught as a part of one of the national minorities of China in the Centre for East Asian Studies under the China division and was seen more in terms of ethnic policies of the Chinese nation state or its security in terms of territory and the border issues with India. There existed a divide between scholars working on pre-modern Tibet and the scholars of International Relations (IR) who study contemporary Tibet. In most courses that dealt with China, Tibet and Tibetans were viewed with a heavily securitised lens and seen as lacking their own history or agency. The Centre for Inner Asian Studies (CIAS) dealt with Tibet and the Himalayas more extensively, and its perspective on Tibet was oriented towards India's security and geo-strategical interests and strategy (Jigme Yeshi Lama, personal interview). Further, Tibetan Studies was caught in the conflict between opposing ideological camps—one that was considered pro-China and the other pro-Tibet—where Tibet was seen as the ideological other of China. One notable exception in this regard was Professor Dawa Norbu[9] who taught at the School of International Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University (1987-2006) and mentored student cohorts in Tibetan studies. Norbu's work tried to overcome ideological problems, and he encouraged students to do research in areas where they had domain knowledge; for example, he supported his student M.N. Rajesh, who had a background in ancient history, to pursue a project on pre-modern Tibetan Buddhist monasteries (M.N. Rajesh, personal interview).

Buddhism

Just as Buddhism has been the defining lens for Tibetan Studies in the West, it has also informed the trajectory of Tibetan Studies in India. A number of scholars, such as Lopez, have shown how the field of Tibetan Studies in North America from the 1960s onwards has been defined by Buddhism because of a confluence of events centring around the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the subsequent exile of the Dalai Lama to India (Lopez, Jr. 2018). For example, Lopez shows how 19th century Western scholarship on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism highlighted Lamaism—a pejorative term for Tibetan Buddhism—as a corrupt, distorted version of Buddhism, while 20th twentieth-century scholarship highlighted Tibetan Buddhism as

an unbroken line from Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings through the Nalanda lineage.[10] Lopez explains the shift as occurring due to the increased access not only to the visible presence and intellectual campaigns of the Dalai Lama in front of a global audience but also to a large archive of Tibetan texts that were carried over to India by the Tibetans seeking refuge (Lopez, Jr. 2018). He explains how the development of departments of Religious Studies in the US was aided by scholars trained in Buddhist monasteries of India, as well as the role played by Tibetan monks who were hosted by these universities as visiting faculty.

Likewise, as we have mentioned in a previous section, higher educational institutions offering Tibetan Studies, and supported by the Indian state, follow a curriculum primarily oriented towards Buddhist philosophy.These include the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS) in Leh, Ladakh, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh and the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies (CIHCS) in West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh. These institutes follow, albeit in an abridged and modified form, the curriculum of monastic study in the Tibetan and Himalayan monasteries in India, which teach Buddhist philosophy to monks and nuns.

Language Training

Linguistic training has been prominently absent in research relating to Tibet in India. The exclusion of the Tibetan language from the curricula in many institutions in India—which otherwise offer Korean, Japanese, Mandarin and other Asian languages—has negatively limited the work of Indian scholars in the field of Tibetan Studies (Tenzin Lekshay, personal interview). Universities such as Panjab University focus on Tibetan language as a course and not on Tibetan culture, geography, history and other issues. Wahid, during his tenure as Vice Chancellor of the Islamic University of Science and Technology in Srinagar (2005-2011)—the capital of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir—started the Rinchen Shah Centre for West Himalayan Cultures where language programs were to be included, but the proposal did not get enough support. Wahid added that the Tibetan language should be taught at the universities that offered research programs on the region, and language work should be a compulsory requirement for M. Phil. and Ph.D. programs (personal interview).

For many Tibetans who grew up in India without knowing their language, it has proven difficult to navigate their exile identity. The central institutes mentioned above—CIBS, CIHTS, CIHCS—are exceptions in this regard (Gohain 2024). Students applying for admission to these institutes are required to be proficient in Tibetan since it is the medium of instruction and also language of the texts and textbooks in the curriculum.

The dearth of Tibetan language training in Indian institutes is also linked to geopolitical concerns. This is evidenced by the Bhoti language campaign in the Indian Himalayas (Gohain 2020: 84). Bhoti is the word used in lieu of Tibetan language in the Indian context. Different communities across Tibet and the Himalayas speak oral variants of modern Tibetan language. For over two decades now, there has been a campaign among the Indian Himalayan Buddhist communities to get state recognition for the Bhoti language in the Indian constitution so that they can use it as the language of vernacular education and administration in the Himalayan region. The use of Bhoti as opposed to Tibetan shows the relation between language and geopolitics, as Tibetan is seen to be associated with a Tibetan national identity.

Exile, Advocacy, and Public Scholarship

Exile and the accompanying challenges of national identity have blurred the lines between scholarship and advocacy. Barnett (2021) used the example of German scholar Adrian Zenz's report on the mass program of labour training in Tibet. Its release was coordinated with a prominent media campaign, which, according to Barnett, misrepresented the report's findings and 'blurred the solid data... with speculation,' leading him to caution against presenting under-nuanced and 'ideologically-inflamed' versions of scholarly research. In a response to Barnett, Dorjee (2021) accused the former of harking back to an 'elitist' and 'exclusivist' model of scholarship. For Dorjee, 'in today's more inclusive and decolonised models of scholarship, which put a premium on real-world impact, dialogue between academia and advocacy is considered not only ethically desirable but also epistemically beneficial.' In the Tibetan case especially, the transnational confluence of scholarly, religious and activist interest, nourished by a thriving community in exile, has arguably ensured a measure of international monitoring and control over Chinese repressive measures in the

region. For Dorjee (2021), this 'Dalai Lama effect' is part of the reason for the difference between Chinese policies towards Tibet and Xinjiang.

We believe that academic enquiry cannot be hermetically sealed off from calls to action, but Barnett's important and timely caution reminds us how issues of exile and nationalism seep into academic knowledge and disciplinary construction. In the context of Tibetan Studies in India, the blurred boundaries between advocacy and scholarship have meant an exclusive focus on a Tibetan national identity defined primarily by Buddhism. It also excludes other Tibetanised, or Tibetan Buddhist groups, in the borderlands, for example, who are not from pre-1959 Tibet.[11]

Relatedly, Tibetan Studies has not been self-reflexive with respect to Tibetan exile identity. Much work on exile homogenises and essentialises the exile identity.[12] This is also evident in the politics of museums, as seen in Tibetan museums in Dharamsala where Buddhist objects produce a specific story and history of Tibetan nationalism that privileges the religious while obscuring other material realities of Tibetan cultural history (Martin 2017), or even in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, which colonial administrators made to stand in as Tibet's prototypes in the absence of actual entry into Tibet (Harris 2012). However, Tibetan identity is not homogenous, and there was no unified Tibetan identity until 1959. Still, Tibetan-ness in exile has largely come to be defined by a homogenous idea of community, where regional, sectarian, and other differences are expected to be subsumed within the greater national identity of Tibetan (Gerke 2012: 65; Ramble 1993a; Ramble 1993b; Shakya 1993).

After the 14th Dalai Lama established an exile community and formed a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, the process of preserving Tibetan identity and culture among the refugees began in earnest. The Tibetan government-in-exile also set up various higher educational institutions that have gradually spread out from the Dharamsala area. Communities which followed Tibetan Buddhism within India in varying degrees experienced a revival in the post-1959 period through the active intervention of the Indian government as it tried to cultivate the Buddhist populations in the Indian Himalayan borderlands through state patronage of Buddhist rituals and institutions (Chawla 2023c; Geary 2014; Ramble 1993b; Shakya 1993). Studying Himalayan communities on their own terms can

reclaim marginalised histories, languages and cultures of both Tibetic and non-Tibetic peoples of the Himalayan borderlands (Roche 2019).

Conclusion: Towards an Integrated Tibet and Himalayan Studies

Towards the end of British rule on the Indian subcontinent, as World War II raged on, British Indian Foreign Secretary Olaf Caroe wrote a paper titled the 'Mongolian Fringe,' which became widely influential in informing imperial policy in the region (Caroe 1980). Espousing an 'unabashedly racialised view' of the region (Baruah 2013), this 1940 paper distinguished India's 'Mongolian fringe' from 'India proper,' where the former was a site of racial otherness and cultural backwardness. The 'fringe' extended across the length of the Himalaya and included Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and northern Assam. Caroe argued that the disintegration of the Mongolian fringe would throw India's defences open to other 'great powers' in the region, and India must attach all these parts to itself in an 'indissoluble union of interest' (Caroe 1980: 124). The states in the inner ring, namely, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim had decidedly 'Mongolian affinities,' and the latter two were 'culturally in all aspects appanages of Tibet' (Caroe 1980: 111). The racial othering of the Himalayan peoples and the understanding of these regions through a narrow geopolitical lens has had a long afterlife in postcolonial India (Baruah 2021; Chawla 2023a, b; Gergan and Smith 2021) and has also informed much scholarly work on the region. It is our hope that our work joins others who have sought to reconceptualise the region and make scholarly enquiry more inclusive.

Shneiderman (2010) argues that while ethnographic description of individual highland groups came to dominate the epistemological space of Himalayan Studies in the 1970s, textual studies of religious works came to do the same for Tibetan Studies in a manner that valorised the textually preserved world before 1950 as the only authentically Tibetan one. Yet, in many works, ethnographies of Himalayan societies become an extension of the ethnography of Tibet as the study of Tibetan borderlands substituting for the lack of access to Tibetan provinces in China. What this does is to view the Himalayas as a contiguous geographical and cultural zone defined

primarily by Tibetan culture and obscures the interconnections among these various communities as well as their relations with their individual states (Shneiderman 2010).

Many of us in India realise the interconnectedness of the Himalayan world with Tibet when we start empirical research. In the course of the interviews on the state of the field of Tibetan Studies with Tibetologists from South Asia, we realised that much like our own professional journeys, most of our interviewees did not come to study Tibet and the Indian Himalaya directly; their professional trajectories are instructive and reflective of disciplinary and regional silos in postcolonial India. As an IR scholar, Dibyesh Anand shared that he had come to study Tibet as part of the wider 'state-people disconnect' problematic. Sonika Gupta, also trained in IR, came to Tibet through an interest in China (Sonika Gupta, personal interview). Her doctoral work in Chinese Studies at India's premier Jawaharlal Nehru University coincided with Dawa Norbu's tenure there, but she 'couldn't engage with his scholarship because the International Relations framework wasn't made for reaching out beyond the nation-state' (Sonika Gupta, Talk at 'Tibetans in India' Speaker Series, Ashoka University, July 30, 2020). Aniket Alam, historian working on the western Himalayas, admitted to realising that Himachal was part of a larger expanse of the Asian Highlands while researching archival records on Himachal Pradesh from the nineteenth century for his doctoral degree. A possible reason for this oversight is that Indian history has long been predominated by scholarship about the north of the country, although recent work on the borderlands and Indian Ocean has sought to de-centre this (Aniket Alam, personal interview). Yet, the archival record was replete with references to Tibet, both as the source of the rivers of the Indo-Gangetic plains and for the Indo-Tibetan border. Speaking of his time as a doctoral student at the Centre for Historical Studies at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University in the 1990s, Alam recalled that there was an 'invisible yet hegemonic nationalism under which everyone worked,' and 'it had been a huge discovery for me—Himalayas are not part of Indian history' (Aniket Alam, personal interview).

Siddiq Wahid aptly summed up the overlap and intersections between Tibetan and Himalayan Studies: 'My pet peeve is that you can't have a China policy without a Tibet policy, and you can't have a Tibet policy, thank you very much, without a Himalayan policy.'

A 'Himalayan policy' for Wahid encompasses both the Indian states in the Himalayan region and India's Himalayan neighbours, or, in his words—'domestic Himalaya' and 'inter-state Himalaya.' Following the Chinese People's Liberation Army takeover of Tibet in 1959 and the Sino-Indian War in 1962, India's focus has primarily been on relations with China, which has led to it ignoring Tibet. India has acted as if it was possible to articulate and implement a 'bilateral' India-China policy from which it could excise Tibet and the Himalaya (Chawla and Balasubramaniam 2021). For Wahid, the objective of Himalayan and Tibetan Studies should be to build capacity within the Himalaya itself so that, subsequently, those from within the Himalaya can also be involved in this work.

Coming at the question from the other side of the plateau, Tenzing Lekshey was confident that if we focused on Himalayan Studies, 'Tibet will automatically come.' As former director of the Tibet Policy Institute, he held the view that Tibetan Studies could become ghettoised unless the Tibetan school system can be opened up to Indian students so that the latter becomes a channel to develop scholarship in Tibetan Studies. He also expressed that Tibetan Studies should not be limited to the Tibet Autonomous Region but should open up to include not only Amdo, Kham, Xinghai and other places in China—the so-called 'ethnographic Tibet'—but also focus on becoming 'Himalayan Studies' (Tenzin Lekshay, personal interview).

While we acknowledge the centrality of Tibetan Studies in the field of Himalayan Studies, we underscore the desirability of a more holistic framework which is inclusive, inter-disciplinary and geographically wide-ranging, accounting for the co-presence of both Tibetic or Tibetan Buddhist cultural traditions as well as others. An inclusive field of Tibet and Himalayan Studies should include but not be limited to studies of Tibet. An integrated Tibet and Himalayan Studies should not be focused on any one religion, i.e., Tibetan Buddhism, but should recognise the Hindu Himalayas, the Islamic Himalayas and the several indigenous beliefs and traditions that refuse incorporation into any great tradition, civilisational or cosmological world.

The military standoffs in the Doklam plateau (at the trijunction between Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan) and in Galwan (Ladakh), the Chinese change of place-names in Arunachal Pradesh, the India-China competitiveness during the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, or the two nations' vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19

pandemic—all attest to the geopolitical importance of Himalayan areas in the present global context and necessitates an integrated Tibetan and Himalayan Studies framework. Such an inclusive field pays attention to the diversity of cultures and communities and their histories even while remaining attentive to the connections that exist, are growing and are required among these communities given the geological and ecological challenges and expedient political circumstances they face in the present world. The setting up of such integrated centres is the need of the hour not only in exile institutional spaces but in Indian universities as well.

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NOTES

1 We use the term 'Tibetan Studies' as a shorthand for the scholarly study of Tibet's history, politics, geography, religion and cultural traditions within India and not as an identifying term for an existing field.

2 Swati Chawla interviewed the following over Zoom and Google Meet platforms: Aniket Alam, Associate Professor, International Institute of Information Technology, Hyderabad, interviewed on 3 September 2020; Dibyesh Anand, Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement and Employability, University of Westminster, interviewed on 24 October 2020; Sonika Gupta, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, interviewed on 2 September 2020; Tsering Shakya, Associate Professor, Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, interviewed on 29 August 2020; Siddiq Wahid, Distinguished Professor, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, interviewed on 5 September 2020; Swargajyoti Gohain interviewed

Tenzin Lekshay, Official Spokesperson/Additional Secretary, Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, on 25 September 2020; Ven. Ngawang Samten, former Vice-Chancellor of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, on 28 September 2020; and M.N. Rajesh, Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Hyderabad, on 9 July 2021. Swati Chawla interviewed Tanka Subba, Visiting Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar, over email on 17 February 2023; Swargajyoti Gohain interviewed by email Dr Jigme Yeshi Lama, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science University of Calcutta, on 12 November 2020; and Jigmet Lhamo, Lecturer in Comparative Philosophy, Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Ladakh, on 2 March 2021. Please note that we have mentioned our interviewees' current designations.

3 Jesuit missionaries began to arrive in Tibet in the early 17th century and are credited with the introduction of the Tibetan script to the West as well as drawing the first map of the region. Most missionary writings highlighted the dominant role of religion in Tibet, and for that reason, viewed it as a fertile ground for conversion (Shakya 1994).

4 There is a long tradition of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Russia through the Mongolian linkages.

5 Parts of this section have appeared in Chawla (2024).

6 Recent work on Kalimpong is an example of how area studies can bring some regions into focus while overlooking others (Bhattacharya 2020; Dorji 2008; Gerke 2000; Harris et al. 2016; Poddar and Zhang 2017).

7 In principle, Tibetans in India are not recognised as refugees (since India has not signed the UN Refugee Convention); rather, they are 'foreigners' or 'guests.' The Indian government can neither be critical of exile—given the moral impetus and global sympathy for the Tibetans' exilic condition—nor can it afford to offend China by officially recognising rights of Tibetans qua Tibetans. This is a double trap for India, which has sought to circumvent this problem by not giving recognition to Tibetan Studies as area studies. On their part, Tibetans cannot afford to offend India as the host country, and hence, have to temper a truly critical approach towards historical and socio-political problems. Second, Tibetans in India face a conundrum when it comes to opting for Indian citizenship (Gupta 2019). While the route to becoming citizens is not easy, some do apply and avail of this status. However, this poses a problem not simply to the Tibetan nationalist struggle but also to the state of Tibetan Studies in exilic spaces in India, which has largely flourished as a means of cultural preservation or nationalistic education. This has sometimes led to the conflation of rigorous scholarly work with advocacy work.

8 The Indian Army Training Command (ARTRAC) identified seven institutes where their officers could enrol for training in Tibetology: the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh), the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok (Sikkim), the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan (West Bengal), the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara in Nalanda (Bihar), the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies in Dahung (Arunachal Pradesh), the Department of Buddhist Studies at Delhi University, and the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education in Bengaluru (Karnataka).

9 Dawa Norbu (1949-2006) was born in Tibet and escaped to India with his family in 1959. Educated first at a Scottish Mission school in Kalimpong and then at the University of Delhi, Norbu did his doctoral work at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to an important and prolific repertoire of monographs and

articles, Norbu had also served as an editor of the journal *Tibetan Review* from 1972 to 1976 (Grunfeld and Norbu 1980; Norbu 2001, 2018).

10 Important works in the early period of Tibetan Studies included Lawrence Augustine Waddell's *Buddhism in Tibet, or Lamaism* (1894; 2nd edition, 1934), and *Lhasa and its Mysteries* (1905), R.A Stein's *Tibetan Civilization,* Guiseppe Tucci's work on the religion of Tibet (*Tibetan Painted Scrolls*), Helmut Hoffmann's *The Religions of Tibet* (1961), and Marcelle Lalou's, *Les religions du Tibet* (1957).

11 For an early intervention along these lines of enquiry, see 1993 special issue of the then Kathmandu-based magazine *Himal,* provocatively titled 'Whither the Tsampa Eaters?,' with the subtitle 'Confused Identities in the Tibetan Borderlands.' (Ramble 1993a; Ramble 1993b; Shakya 1993).

12 For contemporary critiques of this strain of discourse and scholarship, see Dawa Lokyitsang, *Lhakar Diaries.* https://lhakardiaries.com/.

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