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## Identity, Culture and Belonging: The Socio-Political Dynamics of Tibetan Muslims in India

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### Abstract

*The struggle to reconcile the minority cultural with the dominant culture is something that all minority groups are familiar with. This struggle becomes more pronounced when it is not only about reconciliation but also about retaining some of the distinct qualities by the minority groups. It is not an easy process and often leads to identity crises faced by the minorities. Tibetan Muslims in India, formed out of syncretism of cultures and religion are one such example of minorities. This paper explores the complex dynamics of identity, culture and belonging of Tibetan Muslims in India. Despite adapting to new cultures in places like Kashmir, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, they face challenges in maintaining their unique identity. This is more so because some of the ethnic minority groups in those regions are already fighting their own battles of recognition and identity. This paper reveals how the Tibetan Muslims in India have navigated the politics of belonging securing citizenship and continue to seek recognition as an ethnic minority. This article is yet another attempt to make people aware of this community; an addition to the few existing work on Tibetan Muslims till the curious research minds find their way to this uncharted niche.*

**Keywords:** Tibetan Muslims, Identity, minority, recognition, socio-political dynamics, culture.

Tibetan Muslims or 'Lhasa Khaches' or 'Bheopa Khaches' or 'Barkor Khache', as they often identify themselves are a unique example of a mystique cultural beauty.<sup>1</sup> It is an amalgamation of Tibetan culture with Islamic practices; creating a synthesis of a culture usually dominated by the Tibetan Buddhists and religious practices of Islam. With their thought-provoking socio-political history still waiting to be fully explored, the Tibetan Muslims continue to be a matter of interest for some and an invisible community to the others in India and the rest of the world. This is so because there are not many historical books on Tibet that highlight the presence and importance of this community. This in turn leads to a dearth of research conducted on them. The few literary and academic works on Tibetan Muslims focus mostly on the history and origin of this community. There are still many in India who are unaware of the very existence of this community. The Tibetan

<sup>1</sup> Tibetan Muslims are also known as *Bheopa Khaches*; 'Bheopa' meaning Tibetan in Tibetan language and 'Khache' meaning Muslims. They are also referred to as 'Lhasa/Barkhor Khaches', where Lhasa and Barkor both depict the places in Tibet where they were dominant ([tibetanmuslims.com](http://tibetanmuslims.com) and [kashmirlife.net](http://kashmirlife.net)).

Muslims continue to live peacefully and happily as Indian citizens; occasionally explaining their history and origin to the few intrigued minds.

Tibetan Muslim community is a perfect example of the politics of belonging. It highlights how a community can be included in as well as excluded from some aspects of another minority group of which it is a part. While retaining some of its unique features, Tibetan Muslims also reflect some ideas of multiculturalism and syncretism of culture. This unique identity is shaped by their minority status within the Tibetan community in general and the larger Indian Muslim community.

### **Historical Background**

Tibetan Muslims are a small community in India who are descendants of Tibetan and Kashmiri/Ladakhi origin. This community practices Islam and is often clubbed together with Tibetans culturally and with Muslims religiously, in India. Despite being recognized as one of these minority groups, it retains its uniqueness by adapting to the cultural and linguistic practices of the geographical regions in which they reside. That is to say, Tibetan Muslims are now spread across India but mostly dominating the regions of Kashmir and Darjeeling hills in West Bengal. Tibetan Muslims have adopted some of the linguistic and cultural practices of these regions making them a community fostering the politics of cultural adaptation.<sup>2</sup>

The history of the origin of Tibetan Muslims dates back to the time when Tibet started its journey of trade through the Silk Road. This trade along the Silk Road connected Tibet with the Islamic world (Clawson 1997). This was the beginning of the romance of various socio-religious cultures with that of Tibetan culture that much later gives birth to a unique community. Although there is dearth of literature stating the presence of this community, there are ancient sources that highlight the presence of Muslims, especially in the Lhasa regions of Tibet (Schaeffer et al 2013). Trade remained one of the major reasons for the connection of Tibet with the Islamic world. Tibetan Muslims of India are merely descendants of Kashmiri and Ladakhi origins. This was a result of the bonding that was created by trade that became stronger in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the Treaty of 1684 between Tibet and Ladakh was signed. It was because of the Tibetan-Ladakhi treaty that the gates of Lhasa were opened for Ladakhi traders by the then Tibetan government. These traders were allowed to enter Lhasa every three years for trade purposes. This fostered the bond between the Ladakhi, the Kashmiris and the Tibetans. Some of these traders who were Muslims even decided to settle down in Lhasa, some temporarily and the others permanently (Warikoo 2009). The cultural practices of one and the religious practices of the other slowly permeated through their boundaries.

The Kashmiri and Ladakhi traders learnt the language, diet and dressing patterns as they were the ones who settled in Tibet and therefore got used to the geography of the place as well (Sheikh 1991). The Tibetans were also influenced by their language, cultural and religious practices. The result naturally is the birth of Tibetan Muslims; a perfect balance of culture and religion of these two different ethnic communities. This new ethnic and religious minority is the product of syncretism of culture and religion. The spread of Islam in Tibet is mentioned in the work of Prof. T. W Arnold, 'The Preaching of Islam',

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<sup>2</sup> Cultural adaptation refers to the ability of individuals and groups to adjust to different and new cultures with the help of their linguistic, behavioural and psychological abilities (Hu 2023).

wherein he opines that the Muslim traders from various parts of the world including Kashmir were responsible in spreading Islam in Tibet, especially in Lhasa. Overtime it was a result of marriages and other social interactions that led to the gradual increase of the Tibetan Muslim populations in Tibet (Arnold 1896).

The newly formed Tibetan Muslim community therefore practiced Islam as their religion and followed the Tibetan cultural practices, including some of the Tibetan traditions. This is continued till today but with some varying degrees, depending on the geographical locations they are now settled in. The Tibetan Muslims living in Kashmir, Darjeeling and Kalimpong display perfect balance of their culture and religion in their daily lives. The taste buds of Tibetan Muslims in India have of course adjusted to the cuisines of the regions in which they now reside but Tibetan cuisine continues to dominate their eating habits. The same is true when it comes to their dressing sense with a touch of Tibetan traditional attires. This is more common among the older generations. This syncretism of culture and religion is mostly seen... in the regions of Kashmir rather than in Kalimpong or Darjeeling. This is so because the younger generations in these hilly regions have been exposed to ideas of modernity and slowly their earlier culture is no longer as dominant as it used to be (Biswas and Hasan 2019). However, in Kashmir, one still experiences this blend of culture, although not in its nascent form but still predominant. The common sights in Kashmir are that of Tibetan cuisine restaurants run by Tibetan Muslims, display of Tibetan embroidered clothes in the market. Earlier, the Tibetan attire or *chuba* was worn daily but now it has been restricted to weddings mostly and on other days, they prefer to dress up like the locals in Kashmir (Zargar 2019).

The validation of this syncretism of culture and religion is also found in some of the linguistic patterns that are followed by them. In his work, 'Tibet and Tibetan Muslims' (translated by Prof. Parmananda Sharma), Dr. Abu Bakr Amir-uddin Nadwi clearly mentions about the influence of Kashmiri and Ladakhi language that is perfectly amalgamated with the Tibetan language. The use of word *Khache* is an example of this. The Muslims in Tibet are called 'Khache', which is derived from the word *Khachad*, which is the Ladakhi word for Kashmiri Muslims. Likewise, there is the influence of Kashmiri language in the other daily used words of Tibetan Muslims. This is mostly seen in the way both the Kashmiris and Tibetan Muslims describe the daily five times of prayer or *Namaz*, which are actually the names for different *namaz* used by Kashmiris, that is *Subah* for Fajr, *Pesheen* for Zuhr, *Digar* for Asr, *Sham* for maghrib and *Khuftan* for Isha. The same words: 'Subah, Pesheen, Digar, Sham and Khuftan' are used by Tibetan Muslims (Nadwi 2004). However, the use of such words is slightly declining in some parts of India, other than Kashmir where the Tibetan Muslims prefer to use the words that are used by the larger Muslim populations in India- 'Fajr, Zuhr, Asr, Maghrib and Isha', the daily five times of prayer/namaz.

This growth of Tibetan Muslims continued in Tibet. Along with that, the trade also continued increasing the socio-economic relations between India and Tibet. Many Tibetans including the Tibetan Muslims also travelled to British India for trade purposes as well as

due to some political reasons.<sup>3</sup> Apart from other places like Kashmir and Ladakh, they mostly visited Kalimpong, a part of the Darjeeling Hills and now a district in West Bengal. The bond shared by Tibet and Kalimpong is more than a century old. Kalimpong is situated only about 100 km from Tibet and this naturally explains the ties shared by the two regions. Many Tibetans and Chinese used to travel to Kalimpong and some had even settled there much before the Chinese aggression of Tibet in 1949 and entering Lhasa in 1950. The newspaper, 'Tibetan Mirror' starting in 1925 can be taken as the corroboration of increasing Tibetan population in Kalimpong (Bhattacharya 2020). This explains the existence of Tibetan communities including Tibetan Muslims in India.

The question of Tibetan Muslims' nationality was addressed by Mr. S.L Chhibber, Indian consul general to Lhasa as early as on 27 April 1958. He was one of the very few officials who had an established relationship with Lhasa. He therefore was familiar with the history and origin of Tibetan Muslims. Consul General Chibber repeatedly took up the matter of Tibetan Muslims/ Barkor Khaches; discussing with his Chinese counterparts as well about the question of Tibetan Muslim's nationality. After conducting his research on this community, he therefore came to the conclusion that the "Muslims living in Lhasa and Shigatse who have origin in Kashmir should be treated as Indian Nationals" (Atwill 2018). This conclusion was reached on the backdrop of rising Chinese dominance in Tibet. Finally, by September 1959, the then Prime Minister of India, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru concluded that Barkor Khache fulfilled the criteria of being considered as Indian citizens (Ibid).

As mentioned earlier, some Tibetans had already started to travel to India and even settled in a place like Kalimpong in West Bengal. Among them were Tibetan Muslims/Barkor Khaches as well who had settled in Kalimpong since the 1930s. It is this community that fought for the cause and rights of their fellow Lhasa Khaches in Lhasa who believed that they are of Indian origin. Among them, Mr. Faizulla Chisti, a prominent resident of Kalimpong by then, requested the Indian officials to take up the cause of Muslims in Lhasa who were in dire need of help from the Indian government as the Chinese had not considered them as Indian nationals yet. The period of struggle of identity continued for a while when finally in September 1960 that the Chinese government abruptly consented to the Barkhor Khaches' request for Indian citizenship. It is in this context that mention must be made of the tireless effort of Mr. Faizullah Chisti, then president of the Indian Tibetan Muslim Evacuees Welfare Association who took up the cause of welcoming Muslims from Tibet who were now ready to move to India. The Khaches in Tibet were hopeful that their request for being recognized as Indian Nationals would be ultimately accepted by the Chinese government and that they could enter India as 'evacuees' and not refugees. The Indian consul general P. N Kaul had provided the Tibetan Muslims in Lhasa with exit documents that would aid in their smooth evacuation (Atwill 2018).

The journey of Tibetan Muslims accepting great leap of faith was not an easy one. Many aspects of socio-political crises followed them. From deciding on the regions for their

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<sup>3</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet had travelled to British India when the Chinese Qing Dynasty had attacked Tibet in 1910 and lived in Kalimpong and Darjeeling regions till 1912, when he returned to Tibet and declared Tibet's independence in 1913 (Bhattacharya 2020)

settlement to them leaving behind their historical ties with some Tibetans who refused to take Indian citizenship was surely a problematic mission. This herculean mission was taken over by Tibetan Muslim leaders like Mr. Faizullah Chisti, who unwearingly handled the socio-political dynamics between the Tibetan Muslims and the Indian government.

### **Socio-Political Dynamics**

The settlement of Tibetan Muslim community in India is not only an example of survival of an ethnic minority but also a perfect blend of syncretism of culture and cultural adaptation. On the one hand, this community in its attempt to survive and thrive has tried to adjust to the culture and practices of the regions in which they are settled and on the other hand they struggle to distinguish their identity from the other minority cultures and religions. Clubbed together under the umbrella term 'minority', the Tibetan Muslims' struggle is more about identifying their distinctness among other ethnic minority groups in India.

Due to their marginalized status, the minorities in India or elsewhere are already a victim of underrepresentation and to be a 'minority within a minority' is a different story altogether.<sup>4</sup> Culturally this community is clubbed with the Tibetan community and religiously seen as a part of the larger Muslim community in India; both of which are cultural and religious minorities, respectively. Due to the size of the community, the identity of Tibetan Muslims is therefore difficult to trace and thus it further gets amalgamated into other majority and minority cultures.

Tibetan Muslims residing in Kashmir have their own identity crisis as they are now a part and parcel of Kashmir's identity as well. However, to some, Kashmir has always been home because of their historical roots there, and moving to this region was like going "back to home" (Mohan et al 2024). Despite this fact, they still are a cultural minority there and many are unaware of the presence of Tibetan Muslims there. While a sizeable part of this community resides in Kashmir, the number of Tibetan Muslims residing in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim are also increasing. Having said that, it is noteworthy that the size of this ethnic minority is still very small, that is to say around 350 families of this community are scattered in the regions of Srinagar, Darjeeling and Kalimpong of India; and some even reside in Kathmandu ([tibetanmuslims.com](http://tibetanmuslims.com)). It is interesting to note here that while the Tibetan Muslims were eager to go back to their ancestral home India after the Chinese invasion, the journey was not a very smooth one; both literally and figuratively. As mentioned above, while the problem of citizenship was finally resolved with the efforts of Indian consul Chibber, Indian consul P. N Kaul and Mr. Faizulla Chisti, then President of the Tibetan Muslims, the socio-economic problems began to trouble the community. After coming to India, some families of this community wanted to move to Kashmir as it was like going back to their roots while at the same time carrying the Tibetan culture with them. The other families decided to stay back in Kalimpong. Naturally, moving to a new place, though supposedly their original home was not a cakewalk. After the settlement of political issues such as citizenship and rights, which was due to the ongoing efforts of some Tibetan Muslims like Faizulla Chisti who continued to stay in

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<sup>4</sup> This idea of Tibetan Muslims being a 'Minority within a minority', although from a different point of view is used by Fabienne Le Houerou in his work, 'Tibetan Muslims a Minority within a Minority: From a Kashmiri Muslim immigration to Tibet to a Tibetan Muslim forced Migration'

touch with the Indian consuls, Kaul and Chibber, the socio-economic problems however started to surround them (Atwill 2018). The socio-political dynamics currently is in a much better shape or it could be that the cultural adaptation process continued to speed up and the community started adjusting to the conditions which were earlier alien to them.

The conditions of Tibetan Muslims who decided to stay back in Kalimpong gradually stabilized. This community was mostly a community of traders and business people who now also adapted to the market of the new place. The syncretism of culture and religion already present in this community further syncretised with the culture of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. This improvement in the condition was possible because of the community's gradual introduction to education. Apart from education, the Tibetan Muslims of this region slowly learned languages of that region as well. People like Mr. Chisti had mastered the main languages prevalent in the Himalayan region- Nepali, Tibetan and English. This also aided them in pursuing their trade activities. It was the families in Kashmir that received not so homely environment when they reached there. The Kashmiris did not identify the Tibetan Muslims as Kashmiris. The longing for a connection with the ancestral roots did not materialise well in the beginning and many Tibetan Muslims started to become disillusioned and even started to look for directions where they would receive that warmth and where they would actually belong (Ibid). However, despite the fact that this community maintained its Tibetan culture, Kashmiri culture and traditions found its way to this community. Today, we can see the influence of Kashmiri language and culture especially among the younger generations of Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir. Earlier the Tibetan Muslims were very Tibetan in their taste of dressing up and cuisine. However, now this community is seen dressing up more like Kashmiris than being seen as wearing *chuba*, or the traditional Lhasa attire. While the traditional Tibetan food *thukpa* is still served at homes, the marriages usually witness the serving of *Wazwan*, a famous Kashmiri cuisine (Mohan 2024).

While culturally and socially the syncretism of culture has been evolving in a healthy manner, the conditions of Tibetan Muslims in the political sphere continued to remain grim. While the society has more or less accepted them, the Tibetan Muslims do not receive the same privileges as received by the other Kashmiris. The Tibetan Muslims had faced a lot of problems earlier in obtaining the 'state subject' / domicile certificate to apply for jobs. This shows that the identity crisis continues to haunt them in different ways as they still hustle for being recognised as natives there (Ibid). The same is not exactly true for Tibetan Muslims living in the hilly regions of West Bengal where they enjoy the same rights and privileges. According to research conducted in 2019 by research scholars on the socio-economic status of Tibetan Muslims in Kalimpong, the Tibetan Muslims in Kalimpong have been able to maintain their cultural identity and their socio-economic conditions are good compared to the rest of the Muslim community in the state as well as all over the country (Biswas and Hasan 2019). However the over syncretism and cultural adaptation makes them lose their identity amidst the other ethnic minorities there, who are fighting their own struggle of recognition. This is evident in the finding of their research as well where it is stated that at present, this ethnic minority is faced with the problems of recognition and identity crisis, especially among the youth who are trying to adjust to the changing times surrounding the regions where they are settled (Ibid).

## Conclusion

Tibetan Muslims in India embody a unique blend of cultural syncretism; adapting to the local cultures of Kashmir, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, while navigating the complexities of their own identity. However, this cultural adaptability comes at a cost, as they struggle to maintain their distinct identity amidst the dominant cultures of what they call their 'home'. The experience of Tibetan Muslims is characterised by an identity flux, suspended between cultural adaptation and identity loss. This predicament is worsened due to the scarcity of research and literature on this community, leaving them without a clear understanding of their own history and heritage.

Despite these challenges, the history of Tibetan Muslims in India highlights the crucial role of the Indian government support in the past, and community leadership in facilitating their integration. The contributions of Indian governments and Tibetan Muslim leaders have been instrumental in securing citizenship and recognition as an ethnic group within India's diverse minority landscape. However, the struggle of Tibetan Muslims in India is real and not only in the social level featuring cultural identity but also about the politics of belonging. As this community navigates the complexities of their multifaceted identity, there is also a need for recognition and acceptance within the broader Indian society; a need to recognise them as 'Tibetan Muslims', an ethnic minority willing to adapt to the culture and politics of India's other ethnic minority groups, yet distinct in their own ways.

That is to say, paradoxically, the very syncretism and values of multiculturalism that enable Tibetan Muslims to thrive in India also unintentionally threaten to erase their distinct identity. As this minority community becomes more visible and acknowledged, it is essential to recognise the delicate balance between cultural adaptability and identity preservation. Ultimately, it can be stated that the Tibetan Muslim experience in India serves as a powerful reminder of the complexities of identity, culture, and belonging in a multicultural society.

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