



Tibetan Studies in India: Past, Present and Future

Event Summary

Tuesday, 9 April, 2024

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress hosted the 24th edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Studies Tiffin Talk on ‘Tibetan Studies in India: Past, Present and Future’ with Swati Chawla, Associate Professor, O.P. Jindal Global University.
- The discussion assessed the state of Himalayan and Tibetan Studies in India. The talk explored how to productively study Tibet by prioritising Tibetan Studies in academic programmes in Indian universities.
- Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP and Sonika Gupta, Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras joined as discussants. The talk was moderated by Constantino Xavier, Fellow, CSEP. Participants of the discussion included government officials, researchers and scholars from India’s leading universities and think tanks.
- The Tiffin Talk series features scholars presenting their recent, evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policymakers on India’s foreign and security affairs.

Archival research and disciplinary limitations

The speaker began by relaying anecdotes from the life of Lama Zimba, a Tibetan Buddhist monk whose journey began in a monastery in Mongolia, traversed Tibet and came to an end in Kalimpong, India in 1958. In this journey, he grappled with the challenges of acquiring citizenship in the newly emerging nation-states in the region, even as he dedicated his life to teaching Tibetan language and culture at universities in Delhi and Santiniketan until his retirement in 1993. Such stories, the speaker explained, were the object of her archival research that tells the history of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies in India by focusing on the contribution of exiled Tibetans.

In a related project, in collaboration with Swargajyoti Gohain (Ashoka University), the authors conducted interviews on the state of the field among professors of Tibetan and Himalayan studies in and from South Asia. It was found that the disciplines of political science and international relations dominate the field, and the centrality of the nation-state and territorial sovereignty within these disciplines has limited the scope of Tibetan Studies. She also noted the lack of primary research due to paucity of opportunities for linguistic training. Further, geopolitical rivalry between India and China has also overshadowed the field. As a result, the study of Tibet has been approached as a means to the strategic end of better preparedness in taking on the Chinese threat.

The speaker also noted the conflation of Tibetan Studies with Buddhism. She cited several schools focused on the study of Buddhism amongst institutions of Tibetology and contented that institution building in post independent India was done in collaboration with the Tibetan Buddhist monks in exile. The speaker advocated for a more historical and multi-disciplinary approach to Tibetan Studies that acknowledges the long linkages among Tibet and parts of Himalayan India such as Ladakh, Sikkim, and Tawang. She proposed that Tibetan studies can be rehabilitated within programs like “trans-Himalayan studies” or “borderland studies”. This change in lens will allow scholars in India to understand India’s own regional histories as well as her relations with neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan more comprehensively and productively.

Politics and scholarship

Discussants commended the project and noted the complex relationship between politics and scholarship. They reflected on the misalignment between the ongoing process of becoming Westphalian states in India and China and the status of Tibet and exiled Tibetans. They also discussed the statist urge to categorise and the difficult question of granting citizenship to Tibetan exiles in India while guarding against the danger of assimilation. While noting the disciplinary fragmentation in Tibetan studies and the predominance of politics, the discussants expressed a positive outlook on future development due to strategic relevance.

Discussants also commented on the lack of awareness about the existing resources in India and argued that Tibetan studies in India reflected China’s interests in Tibet when it could rather be instrumental in understanding India’s own geo-politics and history. There was discussion over questions of statelessness and out-migration of Tibetans, the Tibetan strug-

gle to keep their culture alive, and the contestation over the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s reincarnation. The discussants also highlighted the contributions made by Tibetans to Indian military missions and the need to understand all aspects of Tibetans’ lives in India to fashion an informed policy.

Deepening and decolonising Tibetan Studies in India

There was spirited participation amongst the attendees. A participant argued that India’s understanding of Tibet is a remnant of the colonial gaze, and a similar lack of investment is visible in the study of all India’s neighbourhood. While there was a period of interest in non-Indian histories, since the 1940s, there has been neglect of areas like Tibet, Myanmar, and Thailand. Another participant contended that for Tibetan scholars, advocacy for Tibetans’ cause goes hand in hand with scholarly work. They noted the Indian state’s lack of political support for Tibetans in Tibet either on moral or strategic grounds. Further, it was argued that question of China’s historical claims over Tibet was not a settled issue.

The discussion also spanned to questions of the political economy of Tibetans in India, US, and Europe. The migration of Tibetans across the world and the facilitation of their movement despite the current statelessness was a potential area of study. Placing the centrality of nation state as the primary contestation between disciplines of international relations and history, a participant highlighted the need to curate methodological tools for conversations across disciplines. The need to incorporate research on Tibet in China and other regions was also raised. The discussion ended with an agreement over the necessity of reformulating pedagogic policy to enable a more historically grounded, multi-disciplinary, and primary research-based study of Tibet and the Himalayan region.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

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