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Research Report | Islamic Shangri-La: Tibetan Muslim Hybridity, Assimilation and Diaspora

ANHS Senior Fellowship Report

David G. Atwill

When I mention the topic of my research on Tibetan Muslims to many Americans, I am often met with an incredulity bordering on outright skepticism. At the heart of this reaction is the commonly held belief that to be Tibetan is to be Buddhist. Thus, the term “Tibetan Muslim” at first glance appears to be an oxymoron. As a result, particularly in western literature, Tibetan Muslims if identified at all, are classified as perpetual non-natives. Yet such characterizations are at variance with indigenous Tibetan perspectives that have long accepted Tibetan Muslims (Tib. *Khache*) as Tibetans. Prior to 1959, Tibetan Muslims served in the Tibetan government and even as administrative assistants to several Dalai Lamas.

The lingering definitional impediments to accepting the Tibetan Muslims as Tibetans became infinitely more complex in 1960 when the Indian government successfully negotiated the resettlement of nearly a thousand Khache from Lhasa, Shigatse, and Tsetang into India. (For a fuller accounting of this incident see my recently published article “Boundaries of Belonging: Sino-Indian Relations and the 1960 Tibetan Muslim Incident,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 1: 1-26, 2016.) Unlike their Tibetan Buddhist neighbors who fled Tibet arriving in India as refugees, the Tibetan Muslims were accorded Indian citizenship as a result of their Kashmiri ancestry. In the intervening half century, largely as a result of this difference in status, the Dharamsala-based Tibetan government-in-exile did not actively include the Tibetan Muslims in their government or elections.

When I was selected as the ANHS Senior Fellow, the long-term implications of the displaced person status of most Tibetan Buddhist refugees as compared to the Tibetan Muslim status as citizens ranked high on the list of questions I hoped to ask the leaders of the Tibetan Muslim communities in Srinagar, Kathmandu, and Darjeeling. Yet it is their status in Kashmir that most interested me. Tibetan Muslim settlements have existed in Srinagar for over fifty years, making them a familiar fixture within Srinagar society, yet their identification as Tibetans (and refugees) still rankles.

Almost all Khache in Srinagar prefer to be called ‘Kashmiri.’ When asked to elucidate, one elder Khache explained, “We are basically Kashmiri, but people still call us Tibetans which hurts us.” Another person with whom I spoke put even a sharper edge on his response. “Don’t call us Tibetans,” he said before adding “We are not refugees. We are Kashmiris.”

Such a reaction stems in large part out of the fact that although granted Indian citizenship, they were declared as non-state subjects within Jammu and Kashmir. As such, the Tibetan Muslims could not purchase property, vote, or avail themselves of the educational benefits of their fellow Kashmiri. The lack of such rights has resulted in many of the community to pursue Kashmiri citizenship (legally defined as State Subjects).

The situation of the Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir paralleled on many levels the efforts of many exiled Tibetan

Buddhists. As displaced persons, they had few rights, even after five decades of residency in India. This situation is changing as the result of key court cases involving several Tibetan Buddhists born in India prior to 1982 yet were denied Indian citizenship. In response to these cases, the Election Commission of India, in 2015, ordered State Commissions “to include all people of Tibetan origin born in India between 1950 and 1987.”

In slightly different contexts, the Tibetan Buddhist and Tibetan Muslim communities are again facing very similar questions about the ways their decision to leave Tibet has affected their Tibetan identity. It was with these questions in mind that I approached my ANHS-sponsored research, lining up more than two dozen interviews in Srinagar with a wide array of Tibetan Muslims who now reside in Dubai, Kathmandu, and Darjeeling but had agreed to meet me in Srinagar. All was in place, and indeed all my contacts informed me of their arrival in Srinagar. The ill-timed death of Burhan Muzaffar Wani, a commander of the Azad Kashmir-based Hizbul Mujahideen was killed, which led to strikes, government imposed curfews, and violent clashes with government forces resulting in nearly eighty deaths.

This violence prevented my visit to Srinagar. However, my other interviews in Kathmandu, Darjeeling and Kalimpong, allowed me to query Tibetan Muslims and Tibetans about their interpretation of their status in the eyes of their own community and that of the broader Indian state. Many Tibetan Buddhists I interviewed, suggested that the refugee status might be deliberately held in an unspoken agreement by both Indian and the Government-in-Exile to maintain the pressure on China to “free Tibet.”

In the last year and a half, however, those Tibetans born in India (before 1982) after a long court battle were allowed to become Indian citizens as well. Such a choice is both an emotional and financial one, given that many in the exile Tibetan Buddhist community believe that they “are not immigrants, but political refugees waiting to return home,” as one of my interlocutors said to me. “We cannot settle in exile. Our rights are in Tibet, not in India.” But now more than a half century after the Dalai Lama fled, many Tibetan youth seek the opportunities denied them by remaining refugees.

The choice for Tibetan Muslims was very different, since they entered India in 1960 as Indian citizens but have been largely excluded from both Kashmiri and Tibetan-in-exile political activities, despite the Dalai Lama’s consistent inclusive attitude towards Tibetan Muslims. The contrast between the experiences of these two groups highlights

the very different road traveled after centuries of shared experiences in Lhasa. What both groups continue to share, however, is the lingering desire to retain their half-century old ties to a land most of the Tibetan youths I interviewed have never visited.

Keywords: Islam, Tibet, Tibetan Muslim, Khache, ethnicity, transnational, China, India, Nepal, diaspora.

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