

# REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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## Lecture 19: Crossing Borders (India-Tibet)-IV

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to discuss the India-Tibet border through our understanding and analysis of the memoir *Across Many Mountains*. So, talking about the India-Tibet border, it stretches across the Himalayas, linking India with the Tibetan plateau. This border is not only a political boundary but also a conduit or channel for centuries of cultural, spiritual, and trade exchanges.


So, India and Tibet have contributed a lot vis-à-vis one another's cultural, spiritual, and commercial lives. They have a lot of shared traditions and shared elements. And this interchange, this exchange, has been going on since time immemorial. This region, the Indo-Tibet border, the India-Tibet border, has been shaped by ancient trade routes.

**India-Tibet Border : Migration in Context**

- The India-Tibet border stretches across the majestic Himalayas, linking India and the Tibetan Plateau.
- This border is not only a political boundary but also a conduit for centuries of cultural, spiritual, and trade exchanges.
- The region has been shaped by ancient trade routes, the spread of Buddhism, and rich intercultural interactions.
- Migration, especially post-1950, has been shaped by geopolitical factors. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet, many Tibetans fled to India, leading to the formation of significant Tibetan refugee communities, particularly in places like Dharamshala.



Source: NatSrat



The spread of Buddhism and a rich repertoire of intercultural interactions are something we see developing across centuries through this route. Now, migration, especially the post-1950 displacement, has been shaped by geopolitical factors. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet, many Tibetans fled. They left their homeland and came to India as refugees, as a population in exile.

and it led thereby to the formation of a significant Tibetan refugee community, particularly settling in places like Dharamshala. So as the Chinese invade Tibet, they occupy Tibet, A significant population from Tibet flees and enters India and they settle particularly in places like Dharamshala. So the Shimla Agreement that happened in 1914 attempted at demarcating the Indo-Tibet border. However, China's refusal to recognize the McMahon Line has led

to ongoing disputes since that time. The Shimla Agreement set the stage for future conflicts over territory and sovereignty between China and Tibet. According to Dalai Lama, to quote him, India and Tibet share an ancient relationship rooted in mutual respect and spirituality. Unquote. The 1962 Sino-Indian War stemmed from border disputes with Tibet as a focal point of conflict leading to a shift in India's foreign policy and defense strategies.

Following the Sino-Indian War, India became more involved with Tibetan refugees and allowed the Tibetan government in exile to function within the Indian border. The India-Tibet border is thus strategically significant due to its proximity to China. Further, the Indian-Tibet border serves as a critical buffer zone between India and China, both of which are considered as emerging superpowers. Control over the India-Tibet border has implications with respect to national security and military strategies in this region. Now, Tenzing Gyatso, who is the 14th Dalai Lama, states that the destiny of Tibet is intertwined with the destiny of India.

So, India and Tibet share a close relationship with respect to international relations and diplomatic policies, such that the question of development, the question of human rights protection—all these things are interdependent. Especially, Tibet in a way has a certain dependence on India for a section of its population that lives here. So, the migration of Tibetans shapes local demographics and further enriches Indian culture through Tibetan traditions. So, at the same time, we understand that India is also beholden to Tibetan traditions and cultures that have enriched its own tapestry and its already multicultural scenario.

So, following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, there is this migration that has been happening since the year 1959. So, post-1959, one sees an estimated number of 100,000 Tibetans fleeing to India, seeking refuge and safety. The influx created a need for new communities and the development of support systems for Tibetan refugees in India. So, major Tibetan settlement areas in India include McLeodganj, Bylakuppe, and Mundgod,

all of which house monasteries and cultural centers. So, these areas where Tibetan refugees have settled serve as hubs for Tibetan culture, education, and religious practices.

The significant Tibetan migration to India post-1959 has created vibrant Tibetan communities, especially in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. According to Melvin Goldstein, I quote, 'Following the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, thousands of Tibetans sought refuge in India,' altering the demographic landscape of the region.' Interaction between Tibetan and Indian communities fosters cultural exchanges and enriches one another's culture. According to scholar and critic Sanjay Kumar, I quote, 'The Tibetan diaspora in India has been pivotal in preserving Tibetan culture while contributing to India's multicultural fabric,' unquote.

So, when we look at the cultural contributions that the Tibetan displaced population has made in India. So, migration involves not just physical relocation but also the transference of cultural practices and identities. When we study the contributions of Tibetan culture, in the Indian landscape, in the Indian cultural landscape, we consider, we include Tibetan cuisine, Tibetan music, as well as the festivals that the displaced populace has brought along with it. And these cuisine, music, and festivals have been integrated into Indian culture, thereby enhancing the multicultural landscape.

**India-Tibet Border : Migration in Context**

**Cultural Contribution**

- Migration involves not just physical relocation but also the transfer of cultural practices and identities.
- Tibetan cuisine, music, and festivals have been integrated into Indian culture, enhancing the multicultural landscape.
- Festivals such as **Losar (Tibetan New Year)** celebrated in refugee communities and preservation of traditional Tibetan dishes, such as **momos** (dumplings) and **thukpa** (noodle soup).



Losar Festival in Ladakh (via Lehang Nang)



Thukpa (via Hindustan times)



So, we have Tibetan festivals such as Losar, also known as the Tibetan New Year, which is celebrated in the refugee communities. Furthermore, these communities are instrumental in preserving certain traditional Tibetan dishes, such as the Tibetan momo, also known as dumplings, as well as the thukpa, or the noodle soup. Additionally, we see that handwoven carpets and rugs, known for their intricate designs and vibrant colors, come from the Tibetan immigrant community. And these designs on the rugs and carpets

have specific Tibetan motifs, which is a way of preserving their own knowledge system. So, traditional clothing, such as the chubas, are made from local fabrics.

According to scholar and critic Aditi Ruth, I quote, 'Tibetan refugees have established a unique economic niche in India, particularly in the areas of handicrafts and tourism,' unquote. The role of Sanskrit in Tibetan literature focuses on the intertwined histories of Tibet and India. So, because Sanskrit plays an important role in shaping Tibetan literature, it goes on to underscore or highlight the intertwined histories of Tibet and India. According to Tenzing Dorje, I quote, 'Sanskrit was instrumental in shaping the Tibetan literary tradition, especially in the case of religious texts,' unquote. So, published in 2015, *Across Many Mountains* by Yangzom Brauen is a deeply moving memoir that documents the lives of three generations of Tibetan women.

against the backdrop of the Cold War era. This compelling narrative tells the story of Yangzom's grandmother Kunsang, her mother as well as her own experiences as Tibetan women. So three generations, the grandmother, the mother and the narrator, their experiences as Tibetan women have been documented, have been narrated through this writing. These women face the challenges of exile and cultural preservation during and after the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

The memoir *Across Many Mountains* intricately weaves their personal journeys with broader historical contexts, highlighting themes of resilience, identity, as well as the impact of displacement on family dynamics. The memoir begins with Kunsang's idyllic life in Tibet, which is dramatically disrupted by the Chinese occupation. The journey across the Himalayas symbolizes both the physical act of fleeing from political unrest or the politically tumultuous situation in Tibet, as well as it points to the deep emotional pain of leaving one's homeland behind. So, Kunsang, the character of Kunsang reflects, I quote, leaving Tibet felt like severing a piece of my soul, yet the mountains beckoned with the promise of survival, unquote.

So, the narrative depicts the internal conflict faced by those who were forced to abandon their homeland. As the family migrates, the struggle to maintain the Tibetan culture becomes central and such preservation is also pivotal to the shaping of their identity, to defining their identity. The narrative emphasizes the significance of rituals, traditions and community, particularly focusing on the culture, the microcosm or the microcosmic society of Tibetans in Dharamshala, where they settle after coming from their homeland.

The family's harrowing journey across the Himalayas serves as a powerful metaphor for displacement. The family's trek through



This trek that they undertake is filled with physical as well as emotional challenges, encapsulating the struggles faced by many refugees. According to Yangzom Brauen, the author, the duality involved in the family's journey is captured in the line of the text which says the following, I quote, 'The mountains were both a barrier and a bridge, an obstacle to our old life and a pathway to a new beginning,' unquote. Throughout their migration, this family's efforts toward preserving Tibetan culture become a central theme and motif in the memoir. Kunsang instills in her children the importance of their heritage, traditions, and spiritual practices.

So, according to Brauen, I quote her again, 'In the heart of Dharamshala, we found both sanctuary and the weight of history, where every prayer flag fluttered as a reminder of who we were.' So, Dharamshala is a place where many Tibetan refugees settle, and it becomes a symbol of both hope as well as the struggle to maintain cultural identity. The community there fosters a sense of belonging, but at the same time, it serves as a reminder of what is lost, what has been left behind. So, the refugee community is a dual signifier of survival as well as, at the heart of it, this melancholia regarding what cannot be retrieved again, what has been left behind.


So, the bond between Kunsang and Yangzom emphasizes the importance of storytelling, memorization, reminiscing, and preserving a given culture. Each generation's experiences shape the narrative, reflecting both continuity as well as change. So, author Brauen says, 'Our stories are woven together like threads in a tapestry, each one essential to the picture of who we are.' This metaphor reinforces or props up the significance of their shared heritage. Personal stories here serve or act as a bridge or liaison between generations.

This memoir effectively intertwines themes of migration, cultural identity, and resilience, offering valuable insights into the challenges faced by displaced families. The memoir delves into the spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism, which provide solace and strength during times of hardship. Kunsang's teachings emphasize the importance of compassion, mindfulness, and connection to one's roots, all of which are inspired by Buddhist teachings. At the root of these values, we have the teachings and the philosophy propagated by Buddha himself. The rituals, at the root of Kunsang's teachings and values, we have the philosophy and vision propagated by Lord Buddha.

The rituals Kunsang teaches to her family serve as a means of maintaining their Tibetan identity, which becomes all the more important in exile where there is somehow, this threat of dilution of identity or losing one's identity and adapting the culture, the habits of the host community. So, Brauen in this regard states, I quote Brauen again, 'Our rituals were not merely traditions.' They were lifelines that connected us to our past and guided us through the present,' unquote. This very statement highlights the role of cultural practices in sustaining one's identity.

**Identity and Resilience in *Across Many Mountains* (2015)**

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- The memoir delves into the spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism, which provide solace and strength during hardships. Kunsang's teachings emphasize the importance of compassion, mindfulness, and connection to one's roots.
- The rituals Kunsang teaches her family serve as a means of maintaining their Tibetan identity, especially in exile.
- Brauen – "Our rituals were not merely traditions; they were lifelines that connected us to our past and guided us through the present" (2015)
- This highlights the role of cultural practices in sustaining identity.



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Brauen emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage as a source of strength for an individual. So, when one's cultural heritage is protected and preserved, one's identity, one's character is defended and preserved. The rituals and practices of Tibetan Buddhism are woven throughout the narrative, serving as lifelines for each of the characters. The preservation of these traditions becomes crucial in maintaining their identity and their community life in a foreign land. So, according to Brauen, 'Our culture is the thread that binds us.'

Without it, we are lost. This statement underscores the centrality of cultural memory, the importance of memorial practices, remembering, telling, and retelling stories about one's

homeland, which adheres to, or, you know, kind of keeps the community together. Artworks depicting the stories of Tibetan families encapsulate the essence of cultural memory, resilience, as well as the importance of community ties and bonding, especially in the face of emergent situations such as displacement and exile. The theme of resilience is intricately linked; the characters face immense challenges, yet their spirit remains unbroken. They want to rebound to normalcy, to normal life after facing an exigency, after facing an emergency situation.

Kunsang's teachings and the bonds between family members act as a testament to the human capacity for endurance and resilience. Once again, I quote author Brauen here: 'Hope is a flame that cannot be extinguished.' It flickers in the darkest nights,' unquote. This metaphor encapsulates or holds together the essence of any refugee's struggle, what any refugee has to go through. Brauen employs a multigenerational narrative structure that intertwines the past with the present, thereby providing a rich tapestry of experiences.

By weaving together the stories of Kunsang and her descendants, Brauen highlights the continuity of struggle and resilience across generations. This narrative structure allows readers to understand the weight of history, the baggage that history brings with itself, and its influence on identity. In 'Across Many Mountains,' Yangzom Brauen explores the theme of women and body politics through the experiences of her female protagonists, particularly focusing on Kunsang and her descendants. This theme underscores the interplay between personal autonomy, cultural identity, and the societal pressures faced by the female kin from the Tibetan community, particularly in the context of migration and displacement.

The female characters navigate traditional expectations regarding their roles in society, family, and community. Kunsang embodies the strength of Tibetan womanhood. She is almost a personification, an epitome of the strength of Tibetan womanhood. Yet she must contend with the constraints placed on her by patriarchal norms. So, Brauen points out, I quote, 'In a world that sought to define us, we found our own voices and our own paths,' unquote.



This statement reflects the struggle, the effort that women are making for their autonomy against societal pressures. So, Brauen illustrates how the trials faced by women in exile lead to further development of their resilience and add to their empowerment. Kunsang's journey represents not only a physical migration but also a reclamation of her identity and agency. The female body becomes a symbol of resistance. Each woman's experience reflects the broader struggles of Tibetan culture and identity in the face of oppression.

The relationship between Kunsang and Yangzom emphasizes how women pass down or bequeath not only cultural practices as heirlooms but also the politics of their bodies and identities. So all these things comprise a feminine knowledge that women are passing down or bequeathing from generation to generation. Each generation navigates the legacies of trauma and resilience differently, thereby reflecting the evolving nature of body politics in exile. So, according to Brauen, I quote,

Our bodies carry the stories of our ancestors, intertwined with our own struggles for identity. This highlights the weight of historical and cultural narratives on women's bodies—how history burdens, you know, individual identity and being, how history comes to bear on the bodies and identities of individual beings. To conclude, in this memoir, *Across Many Mountains*, Yangzom Brauen intricately explores the themes of body politics, identity, migration, displacement, and the question of resilience and strength, thereby weaving a narrative that transcends individual experiences to illuminate broader socio-political realities. The experiences of Kunsang and her descendants highlight how women navigate cultural expectations and assert their agency amid the challenges of forced migration. So, this memoir not only captures the Tibetan refugee experience but also resonates with the larger context of South Asian migration.



It offers valuable insights into how personal narratives reflect and become symptomatic of the collective struggles faced by displaced communities. With this, I come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

#### Conclusion

- In *Across Many Mountains*, Yangzom Brauen intricately explores the themes of body politics, identity, migration, displacement, and resilience, weaving a narrative that transcends individual experiences to illuminate broader socio-political realities.
- The experiences of Kunsang and her descendants highlight how women navigate cultural expectations and assert their agency amidst the challenges of forced migration.
- This memoir not only captures the Tibetan refugee experience but also resonates with the larger context of South Asian migration.
- It offers valuable insights into how personal narratives reflect the collective struggles faced by displaced communities.

