



Comparing Urban Tibetan Communities of McLeodganj and Majnu Ka Tilla in India: Narratives of Urban Precarity and Resilience

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Abstract

This paper explores the experience of a section of the stateless Tibetan exile community in India as they face urban displacement in New Delhi and Himachal Pradesh. Drawing on a comparative analysis of the Tibetan settlements of Majnu Ka Tilla (MT) in New Delhi and McLeodganj, Dharamshala HP, we map the various pathways they envisage in the face of eviction orders from local Indian municipal authorities. While both are highly dense communities of Tibetan exiles, their experience of negotiating urban displacement is dissimilar. This obtains due to different institutional and participatory mechanisms available to them as communities of stateless urban residents.

Keywords: Tibetan Exiles, Refugees, McLeodganj, Majnu Ka Tilla, Participatory Politics, Urban Displacement

1. Introduction

After the Lhasa Uprising and the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959, tens of thousands of Tibetans followed him in exile and have since lived as a stateless community in India. India currently hosts the largest number of Tibetans in exile and there are 72,312 Tibetans in India (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2021). Since 1959, the Indian state and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), or the erstwhile Tibetan Government in Exile, have created a dedicated program for Tibetan rehabilitation. This includes the creation of self-contained designated Tibetan settlements across twelve states in India with schools, healthcare facilities, livelihood opportunities, monasteries, and cultural institutions. Most of these are

bounded settlements with clearly demarcated borders, built by respective state governments on land leased to CTA¹. There is a standardised rehabilitation plan for each designated settlement determining land use. Under this, each adult Tibetan is allotted 1 acre of land divided into residential and agricultural use. The individual residences have a standardised plan, with each house consisting of one small room, one large room, a kitchen, an attached bathroom, and a kitchen garden (Magnusson et al., 2008). Movement within and outside these designated settlements is monitored by the respective Tibetan and Indian authorities.

However, as these designated settlements were inadequate to accommodate incoming

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Tibetan refugees, especially in the 1960s, other spontaneous settlements mushroomed outside the purview of the formal Tibetan rehabilitation process. McLeodganj (in Himachal Pradesh) and Majnu ka Tilla (in Delhi) are the two prominent informal urban Tibetan settlements with thriving commercial and political activity. Both are currently facing long-standing eviction/demolition notices for their residents and are in the process of negotiating with state authorities to address this.

2. Methodology

This article draws on multi-sited ethnographic research carried out between 2017 and 2019 in Delhi and Himachal Pradesh. We conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders such as the officials of the CTA's Central Tibetan Relief Committee that administers Tibetan settlements in India, Tibetan Settlement Officers in Majnu ka Tilla and McLeodganj, and local Tibetan community leaders in the two settlements, including the *pradhans* (chiefs) of the Residents Welfare Association of Majnu ka Tilla. We also interviewed officials at the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, the district administration in Himachal Pradesh, and Delhi Development Authority officials. In addition to the interviews, we analysed relevant government documents procured from Indian and Tibetan exile administration offices. We map the structure and spatial ordering of the two settlements as informed by questions of symbolic and economic geography.

3. Sketching MT and McLeodganj as Tibetan spaces

A former colonial hill station, today, McLeodganj is the global capital of the Tibetan exile community, the seat of the CTA, and the abode of the Dalai Lama (McConnell, 2016). Over and above the population figure of 7309 Tibetan residents provided by the CTA, McLeodganj has a

large itinerant Tibetan population (Department of Home, CTA, Central Tibetan Relief Committee, n.d.). Given the presence of the Dalai Lama and the CTA here, McLeodganj continues to attract a highly mobile Tibetan population to live, study, work and visit and is the community's political and religious nerve centre. As a spontaneous settlement that expanded over time, McLeodganj does not have any such boundaries as those found in designated settlements which have spatial hierarchies based on public, semi-public, and private zones. There are parcels of land that have been, over time, gifted to, purchased by, or informally settled upon by the Tibetan community. Owing to this, Tibetan residences and commercial establishments exist cheek-by-jowl with the local Indian population. Over the last several decades, these residences have expanded vertically – with individual homes being built practically one on top of the other and knit together by narrow stairways.

Four roads lead from the town's main square into the upper and lower reaches of the town with multiple Tibetan and Indian cafés, multicuisine restaurants, pubs, guesthouses, curio stores, roadside sellers, and smaller monasteries and offices of Tibetan activist organisations.

McLeodganj is visually, materially, and spatially produced as a Tibetan space through practices of symbolic geography. Important Tibetan landmarks from Lhasa, like Tsuklakhang² and Norbulingka³, have been reproduced in and around McLeodganj and Dharamshala. Built into the structure of the town is a path for *kora*⁴ that centres around the residence of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan places of worship. In addition, naming is an important strategy through which Tibetanness has been reinforced. Names of cafés, shops, guesthouses, and even roads bear references to Tibet. For example, in 2015, the Himachal government renamed

the Jogiwara road as the Potala Road to honour the Dalai Lama (Menkyi, 2015). Tibetan food, Buddhist/Tibetan souvenirs, thangka paintings, and dharma teachings are on offer to meet the demands of a thriving tourist economy driven by the presence of the Dalai Lama. Stephen Christopher (2020) terms this as “ethno-commodification of Tibetan Buddhism.”

Majnu ka Tilla (MT) has a similar history of being produced and reinforced as a unique Tibetan enclave. Located along the banks of the Yamuna river in Delhi, Majnu ka Tilla was established in 1963 to accommodate Tibetans who fled from the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) due to the 1962 Sino-Indian war. As people arrived, they were first temporarily hosted in the nearby Ladakh Budh Vihar and then moved to an empty plot of government land along the river bank with the tacit approval of municipal authorities. Over time, more families arrived and set up temporary structures and household businesses, mainly making and selling chhang (Tibetan barley liquor) to sustain themselves.

In the first two decades of its existence, MT had no regularised provision of electricity, water, or municipal services like a garbage disposal. During this period, Tibetans expected that they would return to their homeland shortly. As an effect, the initial constructions in MT were temporary tenements, not meant to last. As exile became more protracted and the hope of returning to Tibet began to fade, Tibetans began to build more permanent residential and commercial structures. By this time, the residents also had more financial resources to invest in construction. The 1980s saw a construction boom in MT. Like McLeodganj, most of these constructions too expanded vertically constrained by being on narrow plots of land on which they sit. Simultaneously, MT also began to incrementally secure access to municipal services such as electricity and water and established efficient community-

led initiatives for waste management and healthcare in the settlement. Today, MT has transformed from a scarcely populated squalid shantytown producing illicit liquor to an inviting commercial hub for the global Tibetan community in exile.

Currently, the settlement is spread over an area of 73,743 sq. metres divided into 385 plots that are 100% built up. (Delhi Development Authority, n.d., p. 47). Most individual plots in MT measure between 100-250 sq metres. There are a handful of plots above 250 sq metres and these are primarily owned by the Tibetan Buddhist societies. Each plot has multi-level dwellings or commercial spaces. The settlement’s built environment reflects its history, where these temporary structures form palimpsests for newer, permanent, and swankier buildings that have been established more recently. The monastery, which is the heart of the settlement, is the only open space located in a central courtyard, and all the roads of the settlement radiate from here. These dense buildings host multiple commercial activities, including street food vendors and souvenir shops that co-exist with upscale guesthouses, cafés, book shops, and restaurants. Despite the density of the place, there is an ordering impulse to constantly improve living conditions in the settlement within its limited space. In comparison to neighbouring communities of informal urban residents, MT’s community-led services have created a workable system to deliver public goods like sanitation. MT has a Tibetan middle school, an allopathic hospital, and its own Tibetan medicine institute. Its day-to-day activities are administered through its Residents Welfare Association (RWA) which has been in existence since 1965 and its leadership is popularly elected from amongst the residents every five years.

Unlike McLeodganj, a distinct wall demarcates the MT’s spatial boundaries and separates it from similar nearby

unauthorised communities like the Panjabi basti. However, unlike designated settlements, MT does not regulate movement in and out of its bounded space. Instead, the community deploys membership practices that privilege a Tibetic/Himalayan identity in deciding who can reside in and run businesses in MT to retain the settlement as a Tibetan space. Like McLeodganj, MT is symbolically and affectively produced and consumed as a Tibetan space through the naming practices, food, and other commodities sold there as well as through the Dalai Lama's symbolic presence.

According to Jan Gehl (2011), outdoor activities in public areas are divided into three categories: necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities. Some activities are necessary, such as going to work and waiting for the bus, regardless of the physical circumstances. Optional Activities: most of the outdoor activities that are particularly enjoyable are included in this category. They are therefore vital to physical planning. If time and space allow it, the same thing applies to walking to get some fresh air. These activities are centered around the presence of others in public spaces.

In Gehl's opinion, only necessary activities should be conducted when outdoor areas are of poor quality. In the case of MT and McLeodganj, these conditions and the area are inhabited for shelter needs, and no other items such as hierarchy⁵ of space are considered. While most informal settlements lack any physical arrangement to promote this hierarchy, in MT and McLeodganj, there is a sense of order when strangers enter the space, and this is organic rather than imposed.

Simultaneously, McLeodganj and MT present unique narratives within the exile experience. As urban communities, their histories are shaped significantly by their experiences of urban precarity due to their informal/unauthorised status. In the case of

McLeodganj, the town as a whole has ongoing negotiations with local forest and district authorities to address the issue of encroachment on forest land. Within this process, there are specific tracts of land inhabited by Tibetans. For example, a group of 218 Tibetan families along the TIPA road are currently under threat of eviction for encroaching on forest land. Other Tibetan inhabited sites in McLeodganj facing possible eviction include smaller parcels of residential buildings on Bhagsu road and Meetha Nalla. It is significant to note that these are non-contiguous and scattered among locally owned and inhabited areas that are also in violation of forest laws and facing possible eviction.

Similarly, MT, as an unauthorised urban settlement, like other unauthorised settlements⁶ in Delhi, has, since the 1980s, faced recurrent eviction orders for land encroachment and zoning violations from the different authorities in Delhi. In response to this ongoing precarity, in 2004, MT decided to participate in the ongoing formal process of regularisation offered by the Delhi government to eligible unauthorised urban residents of Delhi (Balasubramaniam & Gupta, 2019). This process seeks to formalise the land tenure of unauthorised colonies, grant ownership rights over the built structures to individuals, and bring these spaces within the purview of the Delhi Master Plan. For reasons related to Delhi's electoral politics, this process has not progressed substantially since 2008, with MT currently holding a provisional regularisation status (Sheikh and Banda, 2014).

Given the precarity of land tenure in McLeodganj and MT, their residents have energised multiple pathways of negotiation to entrench claims over land.

4. Pathways to negotiations: Dissimilarities in process and outcome

In McLeodganj, the eviction orders served to the inhabitant of TIPA road initiated a series of consultations between the CTA and the Himachal state government to ameliorate the concerns of the Tibetans. The inhabitants of the houses under threat nominated community leaders from among them to negotiate with the CTA and the state authorities. In these consultations, it became clear that it would be difficult to accommodate the claims of the Tibetan residents without first engaging with similar violations of forest laws by the local population elsewhere in McLeodganj and possibly the entire state. This is a politically tricky situation that no political party or state government has been willing to take on since 2012. Therefore, the Himachal government took the view that no policy regarding these encroachments by Tibetans could be made at the state level, as Tibetan rehabilitation is a centrally administered issue tied to the broader India-China relationship. After a series of fresh negotiations between the Ministry of Home Affairs and the CTA, a standardised Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy (TRP) was proposed in 2014. The TRP proposed a 20-year lease to address the problem of land tenure precarity for all Tibetan settlements. The TRP, however, had to be individually adopted and implemented by respective state governments. While the Himachal government adopted the TRP in 2015, it framed specific guidelines for its implementation that necessitated categorising Tibetans facing eviction into “bonafide settlers” versus “encroachers.” This has proved to be an impossible task without creating resentment among the local Indian population facing eviction. As of now, the matter is yet unresolved and is stalled, awaiting further clarification from the central Ministry of Home Affairs.

Within the structure of these negotiations, Tibetan residents in McLeodganj did not

have formal avenues for participation and could not press their claims of rights to the city. Their role was limited to making appeals to the CTA that represented their interests in consultations with the Government of India and local district authorities for ad-hoc accommodations. It is significant to note that the CTA, as a refugee administration located in India, has limited manoeuvrability in these negotiations and must comply with central and state-level policy decisions. This lack of participatory structures for the Tibetan residents of McLeodganj, in effect, perpetuates the precarities they experience.

On the other hand, the residents of MT have formal access to municipal negotiations within the process of regularisation of unauthorised colonies in Delhi. The Delhi government recognises the Residents Welfare Association (RWA) of the unauthorised colonies as the primary associational actor in implementing its regularisation drive. All unauthorised colonies must form an RWA to represent their interest and participate formally in the process of regularisation.

MT’s residents formed an RWA in the early days of the settlement's creation and the body pre-dates the presence of the CTA’s local Tibetan settlement office here. This body effectively governs MT and codifies rules of membership, residence, and property transactions for the settlement. It also maintains detailed blueprints of property claims of residents within the settlement.

Before participating in the regularisation drive, the RWA played a key, albeit informal role, in negotiating with Delhi and the central government to set aside eviction and demolition notices. However, this was largely through a process of appeals and primarily depended on the goodwill of the Indian state towards Tibetan refugees. However, with the regularisation drive, MT’s RWA became the formal actor in pursuing tenure security and property

ownership rights in the settlement. The community no longer had to resort to their earlier mode of making appeals to Central authorities on the grounds of refugee identity. The narrative for the residents of MT changed from one of seeking refuge to seeking rights to the city. In participating in the regularisation drive, MT drew on support for their application from the local elected representative of the Delhi Legislative Assembly, Mr. Parlad Singh Sawhney. Although there is ongoing ambiguity about the voting rate of Tibetans in India, this is part of the broader voter mobilisation for Delhi's municipal, State, and Parliamentary elections by Indian politicians (Gupta, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Urban precarity has been a structural condition for Tibetan exiles living in MT and McLeodganj. However, existing analyses do not explore the complex interplay of statelessness and urban informality in shaping the Tibetan experience in urban centres. Some studies consider Tibetans as any other community of urban informal dwellers to argue that these sites are victims of ghettoization due to discriminatory planning strategies (Muku et al., 2016). Other studies locate these sites within the politics of Tibetan refugee identity and institutional processes of exile and do not explore their distinct histories as urban communities

We argue for stateless communities like the Tibetans, the threat of eviction from urban spaces is an added layer of precarity for the already displaced community. This shapes the nature of claims that Tibetans assert over land in exile as well as the institutional pathways available to them to pursue these claims. As demonstrated above, these differing institutional avenues that are available to residents in MT and McLeodganj have had specific outcomes for tenure security and their continued residence in their respective locations.

In McLeodganj, the stalled process has had a deleterious impact on their ability not just to ensure tenure security, but even their ability to safely inhabit their homes. Specifically, the residents of TIPA road, Bhagsu road, and Meetha Nalla do not have permission from local authorities to make any changes to their dwellings, including the necessary repairs. Most of the dwellings on TIPA road are inhabited by less affluent and older members of the community. These are located precariously on a slope that routinely becomes unsafe to inhabit during the monsoon, possibly one landslide away from collapse. These dwellings are already hazardous given that they are dense-packed together along a narrow, twisting uphill plane that leaves scarcely any room for more than one person to pass between them. A community leader poignantly said that in the event of the death of any resident, the community has a tough task transporting the body out of these dwellings, given the narrow corridors that link one structure to the next. In case of a disaster like a fire, he worries that the place would turn into a deathtrap (personal communication, 28 September 2018). Considering the lack of basic spatial hierarchy needs of informal settlements, the meaningful relationship between public, semi-private, and private thresholds is encroached and recalibrated to accommodate new social and urban tolerances.

Given the protracted nature of tenure precarity, many residents have decided to move away. Generally speaking, anyone who can afford to move has either done so or plans to do so. While outmigration for a better life and employment opportunities is a general trend, especially among the better-educated younger Tibetans in India (Social and Resource Development Fund, Central Tibetan Administration, 2020), the trigger in the TIPA road case is the everyday physical danger and long-term uncertainty. In contrast, MT is a thriving commercial and residential space with the

residents putting their faith in the regularisation process to eventually obtain individual ownership rights over their homes and business premises. As mentioned earlier, this is evidenced by ongoing renovations and newer constructions, and commercial enterprises.

Moreover, MT has emerged as an urban hipster spot, with its cafes being featured in lists of best cafes globally (Dodds, 2022)! While there are continued concerns about the eventual conclusion of the regularisation process, the residents have a sense of participation and stake in the process through their RWA. The

democratisation of participatory spaces has been vital for the continued sustenance of MT and enables residents to lay material as well as effective claims of belonging to the city.

For the Tibetan community in India, the disparate experiences of McLeodganj and MT in negotiating the threats of eviction have the potential to create fissures within the community based on their differing relationships with the land on which they are located. For a stateless community struggling to reclaim its homeland, this creates challenges of building solidarity for the larger political struggle for Tibet.

Notes

¹ For a detailed account of the different types of land tenure of Tibetan settlements in India, see Balasubramaniam and Gupta (2022)

² The Lhasa Tsuklakhang (also called Jokhang) is the most important religious site in the heart of Lhasa and is home to the Jowo statue (of Buddha as a young prince). Read more: <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Lhasa-Tsuklakhang->

³ Norbulingka is the former summer residence of the Dalai Lama. Read more: <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Norbulingka>

⁴ Kora refers to the circumambulation around places of worship

⁵ Hierarchy of space is an area between the public and private space, referred to as semi-private spaces. In informal settlements, space hierarchy does not consider residents' basic needs.

⁶ Given the rapid population expansion in Delhi and the inability of the Delhi government to provide formal housing for all, unauthorised colonies are an integral part of the city. 25% of Delhi's population lives in unauthorised colonies without legal title to land and in violation of zoning norms.

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