

Citizen Becoming: 'In-between' State and Tibetan Self-Fashioning (1946-1986)

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Abstract : This paper explores the history of Tibetan citizenship, one of the primary non-partition refugee communities, and their negotiation of 'in-betweenness' as a mode of political and legal belonging in India. While South Asian citizenship histories have primarily centered around the 1947 and 1971 Partitions, this paper uncovers an often-overlooked period, spanning the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, when Tibetans began to assert their claims within the Indian state. This paper challenges the conventional teleological narrative of partition by highlighting a distinct period when the Indian state negotiated boundaries of belonging for non-partition refugees differently. It explores how Tibetans occupied an 'in-between' status, existing as both foreigners and potential citizens, thereby complicating the traditional citizen-refugee binary. Moreover, it underscores that citizenship during this era was not solely determined by legal frameworks. Instead, it was a dynamic process shaped by historical contexts, practices, and relationships. Tibetans pursued citizen-like claims through legal battles, lobbying, protests, volunteering, and collective solidarity, revealing citizenship as an 'act' embedded in their daily lives. Tibetan liminality is characterized by their simultaneous maintenance of exile identity and pursuit of citizen-like claims in India. The cautious Indian state, reluctant to label Tibetans as either 'refugees' or 'citizens,' has contributed to this liminal status. This duality has intensified Tibetans' precarity but has also led to creative and transformative practices that have expanded the boundaries of democracy and citizenship in India. Beyond traditional narratives of Indian benevolence, this paper scrutinizes the geopolitical factors driving Indian support for Tibetans. Additionally, it challenges 'common-sensical' narratives by demonstrating how Tibetans strategically navigated Indian citizenship. Using archival sources from the British Library and the National Archives in London and Delhi along with digitized materials, the paper reveals citizenship as a multi-faceted historical process. It examines how Tibetans exercised agency within the Indian state despite their liminal status.

Keywords : citizenship, borderlands, forced displacement, refugees in India

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