Chapter 5

**Tibetan Poetry as Resistance to Exile**

Exile is a reality which has become an integral part of the Tibetan community for the last fifty and more years. This is a painful reality which each Tibetan has to reckon with – those who are inside as well as outside Tibet. Exile has revolutionized the perceptions of Tibetans. They were forced to step out of the borders of their country which till then had been forbidden terrain for all outsiders. As the native Tibetans had to flee the land of their birth and take refuge in strange lands, they brought with them their culture which had till then been unknown to the rest of the world. Thus the secretive nature of the Tibetan community was lost in exile and the community has become more open. This new openness has allowed the community to survive in the outside world. Today the Tibetan diaspora has made its mark worldwide. This experience of exile is poignantly described in many of their works.

The revival of the community and the various facets of tradition was the first and foremost concern of the Tibetan community in exile. Most of the traditions have been reset so that the modernisation of the community was made possible. The introduction of major reforms like the building of new schools with international curricula, democratisation of the community which resulted in the parliamentary elections of 2001 and 2011 and the reduction of the powers of the Dalai Lama were path breaking in nature. In the introduction of *Exile as a Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora* written by Dagmar Bernstroff and Hubertus Von Welck the Tibetan experience has been described as follows:
The Tibetan community in exile is one of the most resilient and successful refugee groups in the world. The Tibetans people who had lived for at least the last two hundred years secluded on the ‘roof of the world’ with hardly any contact with other societies and cultures, have in exile performed three remarkable feats. First, individual Tibetans and their families stand on their own feet economically and are able to maintain themselves. Second, a school system has been built up, which has transformed a largely illiterate society (as far as lay people were concerned; the monastics were of course learned) into a fully literate society within two generations – a testament to political will. Finally, His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, the temporal and spiritual leader of the Tibetans, introduced democratization and reduced his own power step by step, so much so, that in 2001 the prime minister of the Government-in-Exile (the chief kalon) is no longer appointed by the Dalai Lama, but directly elected by the Tibetan diaspora. (1-2)

The success of the Tibetan refugee community is chiefly due to their culture of hard work. In all the exile communities they had reset their culture by rebuilding the monasteries and restarting the rituals like Kalachakra as well as establishing centers for preserving medicine and traditional dances. They have started schools and have taken sincere efforts to educate and equip the younger generation. As part of exile the Tibetan society has been transplanted to countries which were till then
for them unknown lands. The rulers of the countries where they had taken refuge had sent them to distant terrains in their lands, so that their own people would not be bothered by the exiles. In India the first Tibetan settlements were in the barren Majnu ka Tilla in Delhi. Then they were shifted to earthquake prone Mac Leod Ganj in Himachal Pradesh as well as the barren lands of Bylakuppe and Kollegal in Karnataka. Even today a new refugee who comes to India, visits the Dalai Lama, gets education in the Tibetan schools and later moves on to the various locales around the world. One could even say that exile has influenced the community in a positive manner. It has done good to the refugees as they could organize their own internal administration, preserve their culture and choose their own leader. Such a measure had helped to rebuild their lives in a very positive manner. Bernstroff and Von Welck in their introduction to *Exile as a Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora* continue as follows:

The Tibetans retained their organizational structure, however, with one important difference: the influential abbots of the major monasteries as well as the big landowners have lost their power and influence with their land. In the settlements, every adult, whether farmer, nomad, businessman or monk, was allotted half a hectare land – a drastic change in the society dominated by monastics. The young Dalai Lama was thus able to bring in modernization and democratization without much resistance. (2)

Exile for the Tibetans is a bane and a boon at the same time. Exile becomes a bane as it uproots the Tibetan out of his native land. It is a boon because particular
care was taken in preserving the Tibetan culture and identity. The preservation of culture helps in understanding the traditions of the community as well as finding a place in the international arena. Sherab Gyatso in his essay “Of Monks and Monasteries” comments: “Exile, statelessness and a rude encounter with modernism have presented the Tibetan society a whole new raft of challenges” (*Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora* 241). However, traditional values like ahimsa and other Buddhist values are given much importance even in exile. The care given to the preservation of the culture has helped the community to flourish with its own distinctive nature. It has become a pivotal point on which the modern world is attracted to the idea of Tibet.

Though it is possible to perceive certain positive results concerning exile, for the ordinary Tibetan the experience of exile is an agonizing one. Hundreds had followed the Dalai Lama into India after the Chinese aggression. The Dalai Lama’s autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, gives a good picture about the beginning of the refugee camps in India and later throughout the world. Jawaharlal Nehru’s kind gesture allowed the refugees a space on the Indian side of the Himalayas. The young Dalai Lama was first given refuge in New Delhi. Nehru had also promised the Dalai Lama a swift return to Tibet. The Dalai Lama was very appreciative of the freedom movement of India. He had great faith in Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister and in democratic India which had gained freedom through the Buddhist principle of Ahimsa. The Dalai Lama firmly believed that with India and the international community in the fray, the freedom of Tibet would be possible within a
decade. The first generation refugees believed this implicitly and they spent their days expecting the call to return any moment. The days passed by and Nehru found it impossible to keep his promise of helping the Tibetans to return due to political and ideological pressure. It was impossible also for the young Dalai Lama and his followers to give up the idea of returning to the homeland. The Lama was transferred to Mac Leod Ganj in Himachal Pradesh, a mountain retreat known for earthquakes. It is the present day “Little Lhasa” or Dharmasala, the current headquarters of the Tibetan Government in Exile or the Central Tibetan Administration in India. Such political changes in the initial stand of taken by India have made the conditions of the Tibetans in exile problematic. The problematic existence of the Tibetan refugees is very clearly reflected in the poetry of the second and third generation poets.

Gyaneshwar Chaturvedi’s article “Indian Visions” gives a good report of the Indian way of handling the situation. He calls the Nehruvian politics over Tibet as “semantic jugglery over sovereignty and suzerainty” (Exile as a Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 75). The Nehruvian policy unleashed controversy in India and rigorous criticism came from three main groups. Chaturvedi has classified these criticisms as those from “(1) supporters of realpolitik (2) Gandhians and religious leaders and (3) opposition parties” (Exile as a Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 75).

Tsewang Phuntso’s article “The Government in Exile” states that the answers the Dalai Lama received in connection with the issue of exiles from his own community was as follows:
The Dalai Lama said ‘Some Tibetans at that time, however, put forward the idea of temporarily settling all the Tibetan refugees along the border areas of the Himalaya so that we would be ready to return to Tibet at the first opportunity. But we decided to give priority to more permanent rehabilitation with facilities to enable all the Tibetans to live in homogenous communities and provide the young with good education, modern as well as our traditional education, so even if the struggle takes a generation, new generations could replace the older ones and take on responsibility.’

*(Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 137)*

This vision was useful for the Tibetan community and it created a sense of continuity and unity for the Tibetans settling all over the world. The same policy is the secret of the modernization of the community which in turn had helped it to prosper ever in exile.

Once in exile the flow of refugees started to double and this created a great problem for the Tibetan leaders. Thus the Government in Exile was created in order to work for the welfare of the Tibetan communities in exile. From its humble beginnings it turned out to be the central administration of Tibetans. The initial problem it had to face was the sudden rush of the refugees from Tibet. They had to be resettled as well as cared for with due importance given to protecting the culture. This was done with international and national aid from the many countries where they had settled. Tsewang Phuntso in his essay “Government in Exile” gives us a
clear picture of the Tibetan administration and about the exile issue it had to face in its initial days. He mentions the flow of refugees following the death of Mao Ze Dong and the Cultural Revolution. Taking the period from 1986-1996 he says:

Between 1986-1996 some 18,700 refugees arrived in India and Nepal. The situation became still worse after 1994 when the Chinese government introduced harsher policies to deal with Tibetan nationalism. More than 44 percent of the new refugees are teenagers and young adults (age 14-25); 33 percent adults (age 26-59); more than 17 percent young children (age 0-13); and only 5 percent over the age of 60. (Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 142)

It required utmost care in analyzing and catering to the various needs of the exile communities as each decade passed. The Dalai Lama and the Government in Exile adopted three strategies to handle the problem of exile. They are rehabilitation, education and preservation. These have remained the major concerns of the Government in Exile or the Central Tibetan Administration since the last fifty and more years. The colonies, cooperative societies, Tibetan schools, children’s villages, handicrafts stalls, reception centers, libraries and institutes are evidence for the success of the strategies.

The desire to return has never left the Tibetans; instead it has become ever stronger and stronger with each passing year. Hence new strategies had to be adopted to tackle the issue. It was in 1987 that the Dalai Lama formulated his Five Point Peace Plan. The proposal was rejected by the People’s Republic of China but
it became the Tibetan stand regarding its existence before the countries of the world.

In his Five Point Peace Plan the Dalai Lama made the following demands to the Chinese government. Michael Von Bruck’s “Tibet, the ‘Hidden Country” describes the plan thus:

1. Creation of a zone of peace in Tibet.
2. Stopping the Han Chinese resettlement plans.
3. Adherence to basic human rights including cultural and religious self-determination.
4. Ending the exploitation of Tibet’s natural resources and the stockpiling of atomic weapons.
5. Starting negotiations about the future status of Tibet and its relationship to China. (Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 40)

This was the manner in which the Tibetan state and the people found a practical answer to the question of exile. They understood and accepted the state of exile and used it for the betterment of their society. This is true with all Tibetans of all generations and of all ages. Many of the Tibet support groups also aim at the same goals of rehabilitation, education and preservation. Wangpo Tethong’s article “Between Cultures: Young Tibetans in Europe” discusses the same ideas. He says that the Tibetan nationalism was based on four major points. These points, he says, were not there before the Chinese invasion of 1950. They are as follows:

1. The cultural and political differentiation from China, with a strong focus on Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism at its core.
2. The unity and equality of the three regions of Tibet, and the unity among the different religious groups, with the goal to create an egalitarian society in an independent Tibet.

3. The Dalai Lama as a symbol of the Tibetan struggle for freedom.

4. The experiences of the uprising against the Chinese between 1956 and 1959, and the ensuing glorification of the resistance organization and its leaders. *(Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 412)*

In the modern day the Tibetans in exile have developed very much. The young and the old work together to develop the community in exile. The Government in Exile co-ordinates these operations. Thethong continues:

Today’s adult generation is able to master their day to day life without depending on their children. And the young people move in circles that don’t necessarily consist of Tibetans. Many young people have severed their ties with the exile Tibetan community and the only contact they have with Tibet is through their parents. In the political arena the situation is similar. There is an air of normalcy with no real sense of crisis any more with regard to Tibet. *(Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora 417)*

An interesting feature one can find about the Tibetans in exile is the presence of Tibet Support Groups worldwide. Alison Reynolds, co-chair of the International Tibet Support Network, in an essay titled “Support for Tibet World Wide,” puts in two opposing views regarding Tibet support groups. While China believes that pro-
Tibet opinion is an organised international anti-China force, the Tibetans believe that to “be pro-Tibet is not to be anti-China but rather pro-justice” (Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora p 419). Reynolds makes a random classification of the three hundred-odd Tibet Support Groups all over the world. It was between 1980 and 1990 that many of these groups began. This developed as a response to a period of uprising and crackdown in Tibet which coincided with the country being opened up to foreign tourists. Tibet Society of the United Kingdom is considered as the oldest Tibet Support Group. It was formed in 1959. Tibet Support Groups are the most in India where the largest number of Tibetan refugees are present. These support groups all over the world are political and the best proof for this was in the worldwide protests regarding the 2008 Olympics. It is through the active participation of the support groups that the movement was a success in that it brought the question of Tibet to the centre stage. The groups are used to educate the world on the importance of the Tibetan cause.

The whole of Tibetan refugee life, as mentioned above and as observed through their day to day activities, is for resisting the colonial onslaught of China. Every repression, every war, every colonization, provokes a resisting force either in the form of a revolution, an armed resistance or a freedom movement. It might vary in different contexts. Many of the resistance forces that had developed in France, Greece and Poland during the Second World War are good examples of people resisting aggression. The resisting force is often militant – both in the case of literature and in armed resistance.
Barbara Harlow in her work titled *Resistance Literature* calls the non-armed resistances as Cultural Resistance. She traces the origin of the term from the 1966 Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani’s study titled *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Kanafani had coined this term to signify the poetry written in occupied Palestine. Mahmoud Darwish, noted Palestinian resistance poet, had once commented that literature from the occupied Palestine had attained a special position as Kanafani had put their collective spirit under the term “resistance” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanafani).

Kanafani’s work is concerned with identifying the Palestinian resistance literature which he concludes as having developed from the cultural siege of Israel. Such a situation is the same for the person inside the country as a slave and for the person outside it as an exile. Harlow says that Kanafini problematizes these conditions. She quotes from Kanafini as follows:

> These attempts at a history of resistance history of a given people are usually, for reasons that are self-evident, accomplished after liberation. With respect to the literature of resistance in occupied Palestine, however, it is necessary that the Arab reader in general and the Palestinian emigrant in particular study its persistent continuation, because it is fundamentally to be found in the language itself and the speech of the Arabs of the occupied Palestine. The resistance springs from these linguistic initiatives, working together with the rigidity of the conditions of the situation. (*Resistance Literature* 2)
Kanafini speaks of the dichotomy of “exile” and “occupation” that provides two modes of political and historical existence. Harlow continues:

The distinction presupposes furthermore an “occupying power” which has exiled or subjugated, in this case both exiled and subjugated, a given population and has in addition significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the people it has dispossessed and whose land it has occupied. Literature, in other words, is presented by the critic as an arena of struggle. (*Resistance in Exile* 2)

Kanafini says that the research will be possible only when the researcher is inside the resistance movement, which itself is inside the occupied land. Hence a true study of resistance is only possible with the help of inside observation. This is a collective struggle from the inside based on a historical perspective. Hence historiography can also be used to derive the true sense of resistance, as history is one of the items which are quashed first by the oppressing force.

Harlow also mentions a second study by Kanafini on the Palestinian resistance and another one by Amilacar Cabral, leader of Guniea-Bisau and the African resistance. Both these writers locate the historical specificity of the resistance movement within the larger collective struggle throughout the world. Harlow continues that since all these resistances were basically against the imperialist dominations of Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle and Far East Asia, it can also be equated to what is now known as “Third World literature” (*Resistance Literature* 4).
One might doubt whether despite of all these advances it is possible for resistance literature to influence the outside world. Harlow cites Hugo Blanco’s *The Land of Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru* providing a good explanation. Blanco, a prominent organizer of the Central American Indians, had written this work during his twenty five year long sentence for organizing the Native Americans. Blanco comments that press and propaganda will work even in illiterate peasants’ movements. He says that the illiterate peasants were amazed as the papers spoke on their behalf (notices organizing resistances) as they were earlier used in oppressing them (court and governments). The papers were stuck to the walls of their houses by the illiterate people and those who were least educated were able to read them and understand the resistance spread through them. A similar type of resistance literature can be seen on the Tibetan side also. They have posted their notes in the virtual world and the world around has seen it even when the Chinese have banned their publication in print.

The colonizers always try to efface the culture of the colony. Franz Fanon in an essay “On National Culture” published in *The Wretched of the Earth* writes:

> Colonialism is not merely satisfied with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns out to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today. (33)
It can be considered the same with what Gramci cites with his ideas of “Hegemony” – the power of the colonizer to repress the colonized. Ngugi Wa’Thiongo, the Kenyan thinker and writer, claims that in the case of literature there have been two opposing aesthetics, one of oppression and exploitation and another of a rebellion for total liberation (Resistance Literature 8). This argument is found in his article titled “Literature in Schools” which had triggered fiery discussions in Kenya calling for a revamp of literature education in Kenya.

Harlow concludes the discourse on “Resistance Literature” by saying that resistance movements and liberation movements represent a collective and concerted struggle against domination and oppression. They are not without their own internal contradictions and debates. It is these self-critical debates that sustain these movements. Harlow concludes calling for contemporary resistance movements to fight against the hegemonic colonizers. This is possible through literature. Harlow argues that the literature of resistance is politically powerful to change the world. This is fully true in the case of the Tibetans also as the poetry is vibrant and it sends its waves into the vast outside world wherever the Tibetans have settled.

The independent Tibetan poet sees the issue of exile not just as a political affair. He is aware of the past glories of his land as well as the current state of exile. The poets of the first generation have all passed away and only some of the poets of the second generation are alive. This is therefore the age of the third generation poets. The experience of exile is best expressed in the third generation poets who
present the glorious spirit of the exiled Tibetan. The features of Tibetanness are united in the experience of exile which is both bane and boon, more the former than the latter. The Tibetans in exile are denied a voice in the public sphere; the print media has cast a veil upon them, as also the visual and auditory media. On the one hand those in Chinese-controlled Tibet are banned from publishing anything by the PRC and on the other hand those exiles in the countries around the world are not allowed to publish for fear of the embarrassment they may cause to the host country in its relations with China.

Such a denial of the basic right of expression has to be resisted. Hence they make use of alternative modes of publication like websites and blogs. The creative skills of the people are developed to a fine art through emails and messages. Even these virtual publications are blocked inside the Chinese controlled areas to prevent the entry of the personae of the freedom fighters and their ideas into the minds of the Tibetans. This conquest of cyberspace by the freedom fighters of Tibet is, however, not given the importance it deserves by the academic world and the intelligentsia who consider these expressions as merely a diary entry or a personal note. The media considers them unimportant but this very insignificance attributed to them enables the exiles to resist in a better way by promoting the issues of exile.

Their poetry of resistance expresses itself in two ways. One way of resistance is by looking for and finding the silver lining in even the darkest clouds. This positive note of hope makes exile bearable. This is most profoundly found in the first generation and to some extent in the second generation poets. Another mode of
resistance is by being aware of both sides of exile – the pleasure of new friends, new avenues of expression and the pain of being stateless without a proper identity. Some poets of the second generation and almost all of the third generation express their thoughts in this manner. Some of them are angry over this statelessness and even produce their poems without a title or write poems titled refugee. However, both these attitudes are seasoned with the spice of hope that one day they would return to their own land on the snowy Himalayas, to a free and sovereign land. Hence poetry becomes a resistance in exile.

One seldom finds any poetry on exile in the first generation poets. It basically tells us about the experiences of a perplexed Tibetan in the modern world. They also fondly remember their antique land. The second generation is better at exposing the themes of exile as they were the first to go intensely through the exile experiences. K. Dhondup’s poem “Exile” is a good example for the Tibetan’s first experience of exile. There exile is presented as something that brings out good results – a positive energy. The poem goes on as follows:

Exile

is a marigold

blushing luxuriantly

in the morning sun

luring turquoise bees

from the beehives

to suck their honey. (Muses in Exile 20)
Here exile is a sweet flower blooming in the morning alluring the bees to taste its honey. Here the poet sees exile as a new experience through which one can see the outside world. He continues:

Exile

is a melody

for the forgetful souls

in search of wider horizons

to cherish and conquer

A gold ring clasping

round the white finger, exile

is a memory of a beloved

bleeding somewhere behind the

the high mountains. (Muses in Exile 20)

Here exile is not just the blooming marigold. It turns out to be a lament for the forgetful souls and the beloved with a gold ring on a white finger. It is a memory of the bleeding reality of the high mountains. This was true as we find instances of Chinese soldiers firing at the fleeing Tibetan refugees in the Nangpa pass later in 2008. The reality of exile is represented as marigold, a melody, a gold ring and a bleeding memory. Though the first lines seem to address the subject in a romantic mood, it is in these final lines that the poem gains its poignant voice addressing the exiled Tibetans and the outside world. It is like an eye-opener to the condition of
present Tibetans and the reality of exile. His poem “Of Exile and Refuge” also presents exile in the same manner. The poem runs as follows:

The lonely heart is a ship
sailing in the starless
stormy night
Groping without guidance in
in the gushing wind
floating to and fro
knocking its head
breaking its soul
into a thousand
crying pieces.

Who knows what symphony
the maestro has
in store for the solitary
ship sailing in the stormy
sea of life? (Muses in Exile 24)

He says that the exile’s heart is a ship which is sailing in the starless stormy world. The poem ends with the poet affirming that the ship is the exile’s heart and sounds of the sea are the “thousand living memories breeding with the sad sound of exile and refuge (…)” (Muses in Exile 24). “Existence Anonymous” is another poem where he again expresses the exile psyche. Here he talks about an exile’s death
which had gone unnoticed, without anybody to mourn and pray for his eventual re-
birth. In the Tibetan concept of re-birth those who have done good will be given
better lives in their next birth. But the dead one is in his exile and his life is just a
routine non-existent one. The poem goes on as follows:

His was the existence of peace
Read magazine stories
Ate at restaurants
Slept on the asphalt road
Till he joined the ceremony of death
on a silent night.
With hardly a soul mourning
A prayer-wheel turning
for his rebirth. (Muses in Exile 27)

Dhondup also uses a graphic style in representing his poems like e. e. cummings. He
places each line at a relative distance from the margins and uses lower case letters in
all the lines other than the first one forming each stanza a long single sentence. This
might perhaps be his style of representing exile.

Gyalpo Tsering too is another second generation poet who expresses his
community’s exile status. His poem “To You from Exile” is a letter to the world
which does not accept the reality of the Tibetan exile. It can also be seen as an exile
child’s letter to his parents. He only knows that he had a family but from the age of
four he has no word of them. In the parent country it says that one is getting not
enough resources but yet they are forced to say that they are getting every benefit. It
goes on as follows:

Are you warm and are you happy?
No, I don’t think so,
But all the same
Your answer must be ‘YES’
Do they take you out
To a theatre or a show?
And can you pray
Very earnestly
Like you used to?
Even then the answer
Must be a ‘YES’.
Although I dream
You are still alive
And sincerely believe it;
But at times
I begin to doubt.
Even if you are dead
I suppose your answer
Will be a ‘YES.’ (Muses in Exile 59-60)
“At the End of the Rainbow” is another poem by the same writer expressing the same thoughts. In the European folk tales it is mentioned that one will find gold at the end of the rainbow. Here the gold is freedom for the poet. But one cannot dream about reaching the end of a rainbow that easily. Hence the poet says that his quest for freedom too is a difficult journey. Gyalpo Tsering has also written three poems titled “Nomad I,” “Nomad II,” and “Nomad III.” The nomad is a landless nomadic shepherd, like the exiled Tibetans and the Chinese are compared to wolves attacking the nomad’s yaks. “The Hermit” is another poem in which he says that the Tibetan people are like a hermit sitting in a cave waiting for a better future. He continues:

In the cage where his hearts beats,
Faint hope sleeps;
The humble Hermit dreams.
In the cave silence reigns

King of darkness. (Muses in Exile 66)

Tsoltim Shakbpa of the second generation is the most active poet of the exile times. His latest poems are a testament of this fact. He is the most active poet of the group producing at least one poem a month and circulating it through emails and blogs. His poem “Hear Ye! Hear Ye!” is a good example for the exile Tibetan poets voicing his concerns to the world. He sings:

Hear ye! Hear ye!

Exiled Tibetans who are free
Lend me your ears

Let’s give good cheers

To a free and independent Tibet

So that we can go peacefully to bed.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

Here the poet is like a ringing voice waking the consciousness of the Tibetan people. He is asking them to give their attention to the Tibetan cause. He demands complete independence for Tibet. The mention of total independence should be seen against the Dalai Lama’s policy of peaceful coexistence. He is angered over the lack of interest the exile community shows about independence. He questions them as to whether they have lost their principles, whether they have compromised upon freedom, whether they have forsaken their martyrs and forefathers. He again reminds the exiled Tibetans in the different countries of the world that they should unite and aim at fighting for their lost freedom. He adds that one day China’s development bubble will burst and hence even though Tibetans have to suffer some trouble they will be victorious in the end. He continues thus:

So rise up!

Fill your cup

With dreams of a happy future

In which pure freedom you capture

Can’t you see

We should be
People of a nation

With the same vocation.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

His recent poems “To Xi Jinping” and “What, Why, Who, Where and When by T. N. S. (Tibetan National Soldier)” are angry criticisms of the upcoming Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s visit to the US in 2012. The anger is often laced with abuse. At the same time he is philosophical in poems like “Water,” and “The Seasons of Life.” His poem “Defining A Nation” runs thus:

The glory of a nation
Can be found in its people
Not in its rulers

The ruin of a nation
Can be found in its rulers
Not in its people

The wealth of a nation
Can be found in its values
Not in its money. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

Here the poet takes the role of an advisor and advises how a nation is different from others. He does not take a political stand but is rather political about the existence of a “nation” and how it is different from others. He continues thus:

The heart of a nation
Can be found in its streets
Not in its citadels of power
The joy of a nation
Can be found in its heart
Not in its celebrations
The beliefs of a nation
Can be found in its people’s silent prayers
Not in its politicians’ loud speeches
The power of a nation
Can be found in its beliefs
Not in its guns
The future of a nation
Can be found in its will
Not in its power. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

Here the “nation” mentioned is the Tibetan nation in exile. It has the amorphous status of being just a collection of people. He is contrasting the image of the Tibetan nation against that of the all powerful Chinese nation.

He is conscious of the fact of exile and the necessity for a continuous fight against the Chinese hegemony in Tibet. His poem “I have a Target” bears echoes of Martin Luther King’s famous speech, “I have a Dream.” It looks forward to the time some day when his children will stand “atop the plateau of a free Tibet,” of the time some day when Chinese and Tibetan will sit down together at the table of friendship.
The poet firmly avows that his is a target which must be realized rather than a dream that may not be realized. He says thus:

I have a target
That some day
Our children will stand atop the plateau of a free Tibet
And wash away the ravages the Chinese left behind
I have a target
That one day
The Tibetan spirit will be exalted
And the Chinese power muffled
I have a target
That one day
The children of the Chinese who raped Tibet
And the children of the Tibetans who suffered under Chinese rule
Will sit down together at the table of friendship.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

He acknowledges the Dalai Lama and the Lama’s role as the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan multitudes. He continues thus:

I have a target
Now until our kingdom come
To make the Chinese leave Tibet
And to return the Dalai Lama to his rightful throne
I have a target

Not a dream. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

His target is to reinstate “the Dalai Lama to his rightful throne and to make the Chinese leave Tibet” (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com). His poem “Tribute to His Holiness Dalai Lama” is a good example of resisting exile through poetry. His poem which honors the Dalai Lama as the greatest spiritual leader in the world resists the Chinese policy of considering the Dalai Lama as a mere political figure. It runs thus:

Your Holiness!
As a leader
You inspire me
As a simple monk
You teach me humility
As a man of harmony
You make me conciliate
As a teacher
You restore confidence in me
As a compassionate person
You wash the worries from my mind
As the Dalai Lama
You draw me to you. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)
He has written such poems in honor of the Tibetan government officials also. His poem “To our Government Officials” is an ode to the newly elected Kashang (Tibetan Parliament). It goes on:

We’ll be watching you
Every law you pass
Every cash you mass
We’ll be watching you
Every word you say
Everyone you pay
We’ll be watching you. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

It is true democracy where the governors are watched by the governed. It continues:

O can’t you see
We’re your constituency
And we hope you’ll be
A worthy trustee
Try and see it our way
Time will tell you if we’re right or wrong.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

Here the poet takes a rather challenging mode whereby he says that time will tell us how worthy the rulers were. It continues thus:

See it only your way
And we may not follow you for long
Try and heal all our aches
So that we may become strong
Try to feel all our quakes
And you’ll see for what we long
You represent us
And we always trust
You will have the skill
To fulfil our will
We will stand by you
As long as you see it our way
We’ll be true to you
As long as you don’t go astray

We will respect you. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

The poet speaks about a give and take relationship whereby he reminds the leaders that if they give respect to the people they will in turn be respected. He goes on:

As long as you honour our toil, prayers and wishes
We will honour you
As long as you respect what the Dalai Lama teaches
So gather your strength and win our freedom
So that we can all enjoy our kingdom.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

He says that till the time the government cares for the people and till the time the Dalai Lama is respected he and the Tibetan society will stand along with them. His poem “To the Kalon Tripa Candidates” is another poem which is about the
candidates of the 2011 elections for prime-ministership. It is an elder Tibetan’s advice to the future leaders of Tibet.

He also talks about Chinese oppressions in Tibet. The Drapchi prison in the capital city of Lhasa is notorious for its evil designs. It is from here that many of the cheap counterfeit Chinese articles are produced by mass bonded labor. His poem “Chinese Prisoners in Tibet” reveals the conditions of the prisoners in the prisons. One could get indefinite terms in prisons just because the Chinese authorities thought that he/she was a traitor. It goes on like this:

Clad in iron chains of imprisonment
Bearing acid wounds from savage torture
They ploughed through the blanket of snow
Bearing off shoes and with frost bitten toes
To do hard labor on frozen grounds
But in their hearts of solid determination
And minds of soaring anticipation
They yielded not to the tyranny that plagued them
Instead they chanted solemn prayers of hope
And sang empyreal songs of freedom.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

This is resistance at its best where the poet brings to the notice of an unsympathetic world the plight to which the Tibetan is driven by the Chinese masters. Shakpa also tells about the destruction of Tibet by the Chinese but affirms that there will be a day
when Tibet will rise up again. Tibet will rise again amidst all trials and tribulations; it is this positive thought that runs through the poems Shakbpa. His poem “Tibet will Live Again” goes on like this:

    Our snow peaks are melting
    Our forests are wilting
    Our rivers are putrefying
    Our animals are starving
    Our monasteries are crumbling
    Our people are moaning
    Our nation is dying
    And China is celebrating
    But have no doubt
    Our peaks will be white with snow again
    Our forests will flourish again
    Our rivers will cleanse again
    Our animals will eat again
    Our monasteries will rise again
    Our people will rejoice again
    And Tibet will live again
    If only we do not lose hope
    And continue our struggle for freedom.

(http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)
However Shakbpa’s finest thoughts are found in his most recent poem “I Want”. Here he becomes as simple as a small boy talking about his personal wishes. He sings thus:

I want to eat freely of the tasty food, Tsampa
I want to glide freely on the glistening lake, Tso Pema
I want to swim freely in the invigorating river, Tsangpo
I want to worship freely in the sacred temples of my holy land
I want to enjoy freely the abundant fruits of my pristine country
I want to raise freely the magnanimous yak that provides me all
I want to pay tribute freely to our savior and true leader, the Dalai Lama
I want to climb freely on the snow-capped ranges of Gangs-chen Dzo-nga. (http://www.peoplefortibet.blogspot.com)

This positive thought that runs through the poems of the Tibetan poets in exile is the one which guides them through the trials of exile.

However, the situation changes in relation with the later poets. More than the above mentioned positive outlooks one finds a perplexed reality. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa’s poems present another example. Here exile is an experience where the exiled person can only view the home land as a distant reality. Much has changed but from a distance everything looks intact. But the original land is no more. Everything is prefaced by ideologies which hide the real issues like hunger. For Dhompa the new cities in reality are only grids in the caves and as slaves of the colonizer the Tibetans are building assets to the colonizer’s empire working for the
success of the master’s five year plans. Their image of home is fluid and transient though very powerful. Buchung D. Sonam evaluates her poems as “for this exile-born generation the need to assert their concept of Tibet, however far-fetched, becomes essential both to understand who they are and to lessen the existential uncertainty of being refugees by birth” (Indian Literature 67). One of Dhompa’s poems goes as follows:

When the elder died in her sleep, Samten was dancing
to Nepalese rap under looms suspended at an
abandoned carpet factory.

(...) The elders swarmed in greys and browns. Brought
rituals to keep his mother’s wandering soul in non-
life. Too many illusions, they said, in Bardo. (Indian Literature 67)

The poem clearly expresses the confused lives of the third generation Tibetan poets also.

Buchung D. Sonam calls exile a kind of banishment from the mother land. He writes of it in his poem “Banishment” as follows:

Away from home

My minutes are hours

Spider travels from the window to the ceiling

Bee flies from the window to the bin

I stare out of the window

Neither speaks each other’s tongue
I wish you would go deaf

Before my silence. (Indian Literature 71)

Tenzin Tsundue expresses his ideas of exile through his poem “Exile House.” It is the remembrance of the houses where they have been staying from the very first days of exile. But he cannot say whether they can return or not. The roofs are leaking and the fences have grown into a jungle but there aren’t any promises of return. The identity of the exiled Tibetan is lost as each year passes by. The poem says thus:

Our house seems to have grown roots.

The fences have grown into a jungle,

now how can I tell my children

where we came from? (Kora 27)

The younger generations are restless in the matter of exile. Two good examples are the poems of Tenzin Rigdol and Tenzin Dikjie. Rigdol writes as follows:

Your body is calligraphy at work –
Smooth, round, blunt and abrupt.

Only silence befits your adornment. (Indian Literature 68)

Dickyie expresses the reality of exile as follows:

We are unbeautiful here;

our stay in the plains has rendered us so.

But whispers now carry endearments,

and we will not have it any other way. (Indian Literature 69)
However, exile is the most powerful thought that derives sweet poetry in the case of the exile poets. The perplexed state of affairs in exile affects the exiled writers. Their poetry also expresses the same state of confusion.

Many of the Tibetan’s exile experiences are written in poems which are titled “untitled”. The lack of a title provides a basis for the resisting voice of exile. Tenzing Sonam, Tenzin Tsundue, Kathup Tsering, Ngodup Paljor and G. C. (Gendun Cheophel) have written poems titled “untitled” expressing the exile experience. The lack of title is the result of the experience of exile. Being an exile is like leading a title-less life in other parts of the world. Being a third generation poet G. C.’s poem explaining the statelessness is noteworthy. He says he is “just a soul in a fix, crying for the right direction” with a “mind mixed in total confusion” (Muses in Exile 4). It is a total wilderness where one stands alone in the wilderness with a heart full of pain and no balm to ease the pain. He says:

I feel myself

standing in the wilderness

cold

alone

empty

beauty all around me

pain constricting my heart

the road of life lies long and empty

and no balm exists to smooth me
of this loss and broken heart. (*Muses in Exile* 90)

Kathup Tsering’s poem is also a confused realization of the Tibetan self. The poet takes regard of tradition and says that he fights against evils and protects his dear ones. The gun battles frighten him but he cannot leave his body for the traditional sky burial, where the dead bodies are fed to vultures. Yet he is happy that he can be reborn in the same land and somewhere in the future he can enjoy freedom. The poem goes as follows:

In the last gesture of heart
I can do what all I want to do
a compassionated fire,
blissful, burn
on the chest of my corpse
and cover my face
with a lotus hand
in my country
There I died once
then reborn
For a freedom has human spirit
and justify a human heart
even if they take away my body from me
and my spirit always glows in me.

(http://www.tibetwrites.com/_untitled_)
Tsundue’s poem “untitled” is also an expression of freedom. Tenzing Sonam’s poem also titled “untitled” says about the perplexed mind of the poet. The poet speaks about a poetic dilemma where there is no rationale and where only strange patterns emerge. Though the poem is basically about the writing of a poem, the definition is also the same in the case of Tibetan exiles.

There are also poems titled as “Refugee” by the poets in exile. Kathup Tsering, Tenzin Tsundue and Buchung D. Sonam have published poems under the same title. Tsundue’s poem tells it as:

On your forehead
between your eyebrows
there is an R embossed
my teacher said
I scratched and scrubbed,
on my forehead I found
a brash of red pain.
I have three tongues.
The one that sings
is my mother tongue.
The R on my forehead
between my English and Hindi
the Tibetan tongue reads:
RANGZEN
Freedom means Rangzen. *(Kora 16)*

Being a refugee is a painful reality for the Tibetans in exile. Tsundue’s poems constantly deal with the same question. In “Space-Bar: A Proposal” he asks the world to give a little space to the humble refugees. He calls in to open the doors and to let them in and give them a space – a space which the Tibetan refugee desperately wishes. “The Tibetan in Mumbai” is another of his poems dealing with the topic of exile. He talks about an exiled Tibetan who is working for a living in a Chinese restaurant and sells sweaters in winters. He is mistaken for a runaway from Beijing or a retired soldier from Nepal. The people laugh at him. He uses Bambaya Hindi, with a slight Tibetan accent making Parsis, who themselves are foreigners in this land, laugh. He reads the usual Hindi dailies and listens to Hindi songs and moves in the Mumbai local trains. Again the poem “My Tibetanness” is his angry retort to the outside world. It runs thus:

> At every check-post and office,
> I am an “Indian-Tibetan”.

> My Registration Certificate,
> I renew every year, with a *salam*.

> A foreigner born in India.
> I am more of an Indian.

> Except for my chinky Tibetan face.
> “Nepali?” “Thai?” “Japanese?”

> “Chinese?” “Naga?” “Manipuri?”
but never the question – “Tibetan?”

I am Tibetan.

But I am not from Tibet.

Never been there.

Yet I dream

of dying there. (*Crossing the Border* 16-17)

Tsundue’s poem “Horizon” on the other hand, expresses the constant wish of the Tibetans to return to the home land.

From home you have reached

the Horizon here.

from here to another

here you go.

From there to the next

next to the next

horizon to horizon

every step is a horizon.

Count the steps

and keep the number. (*Kora* 11)

Exile is a reality which all of them have to face. But other than many others in exile they positively hope for a speedy return to their mother land. This philosophy makes their poetry different from others.
Buchung D. Sonam’s other poems like “A Form of Nonsense Dialogue” explains exile as a filling up of various forms but not getting the true identity. The poet asks the Tibetan exile whether he has filled in all forms. The poem continues:

Have you filled the forms?

Yes I did.

Birth form

Crèche form

School form

Examination form.

What about other forms?

(...) You are very conventional indeed

You see phenomena in forms

I see emptiness in all forms.

Don’t fill any form

Live and chant OM

That is the ultimate form

To emptiness of the form. (http://www.tibetwrites.com/_a form_)

“Song of an Old Tibetan” is the prayer of an aged exile, who wishes to die in his motherland. His other poems, “Gendun Cheophel Wailing from Nangtse Shar Prison,” “1000th Day in Drapchi Solitary Confinement” and “From a Prison Diary,” sing about the tortures and persecutions Tibetans have to face in and out of exile. The pressure of exile has gone up so high that the Tibetans in Tibet have come up
with a new mode of resistance. They have started self-immolations which began in
2010 and are continuing on to 2012. Till March 2012 around forty Tibetans have set
themselves ablaze, resisting exile. Poets like Palden Gyal have commented on this as
a supreme sacrifice. He has written a poem “Repression” on the subject. The poem
goes as follows:

Self-immolations ensure
When a person offers to flames
The holiest of holy
At the altar of freedom
Like a small lamp
Against the darkness of tyranny.
(…) For freedom
Lives in sheer desperation.
Perform baptism of fire
It speaks not just
A holy fire of martyrdom
Burning for freedom
But a real obscenity of repression
For the regime is only fluent
In the languages of blood and brutality.

(http://paldengyal.net/2011/11/06/repression/)
Finally in a close analysis one can very well understand that exile is presented by the poets in a multiple set of angles.

In all the Tibetan expressions concerning exile one can see three major streams – a wish for the right to exist, a desire to return and the lonely voice of an orphan. Among the poets of the third generation the poems of TenzinTsundue are the best examples of resistance. Tsundue’s poem “Crossing the Border” is a good example for the exile experience, particularly the voice of hope that can be heard throughout. It is the tale of a mother and her family lost during their sojourn to India. The refugees had to wait for a long time crawling snow-covered mountains fearing death from bombers and the military moving on to their refuge in India. The family moves on between death and life. Many of those who had walked in front of them were killed as the soldiers had crossed their paths. One can see blotches of blood in the snow-covered tracks. The only hope is their prayers to the Dalai Lama. In her journey into exile the mother has to leave her dying daughter and flees. Even after long years in exile, her mind is still fixed on the memory of her lost daughter. The poem ends thus:

Long after in exile, I can still see her
waving her frost-bitten hands to me.
Eldest of them, yet just in her teens,
leaving home must have been tough for her.
Every night I light a lamp for her,
and her brothers join me in prayer. (Crossing the Border 13-15)
This is true with many of the families in exile. Till 2008 the killing of the Tibetans fleeing their homeland was not known to the outside world. It was only in 2008 that such a killing was recorded by a group of tourists at the Nagpa pass between India and China. This was the first incident by which the outside world understood about the brutalities of China on the Tibetans. It was highlighted in the websites of many of the Tibet Support Groups. Many Tibetans in Tibet are publicly executed for their association with the freedom movement. A great majority also spend long years in solitary confinement. This state of affairs has been described in the poems of many Tibetan writers.

“My Tibetanness,” another poem by Tsundue, is a search for the Tibetan refugee self. The poet is angry at the indifference shown towards Tibet by the so-called civilized world, including the United Nations. In “My Tibetanness” he bursts out as follows:

Tibetans: the world’s sympathy stock
Serene monks and bubbly traditionalists;
one lakh and several thousand odd,
nicely mixed, steeped
in various assimilating cultural hegemonies.

(Crossing the Borders 16)

Tenzin Tsundue’s “Horizon” also deals with the same but with a promise of return. It urges the exiles that the home land which they see in the distance is not a vague image on the horizon. It is one to which they have to return. For the return the
exiled Tibetans must collect signs marking the road to the horizon. He says that even if the dream of return is a distant reality like reaching the horizon, this can be achieved. The poem runs thus:

Pick the white pebbles
and the funny strange leaves.
Mark the curves
and the cliffs around
for you may need
to come home again. (Kora 11)

Tsundue’s poems express the anger in the hearts of the Tibetans at being neglected and ignored by the world. He is voicing the cause of the orphaned Tibetan state. The same can be said about many of the Tibetan poets in exile.

The best conclusion one can arrive at after going through the exile experiences of the Tibetans is the poetic message “Never Give Up,” which the Dalai Lama delivered to Mr. Ron Whitehead. It goes on as follows:

Never give up
No matter what is going on
Never give up
Develop the heart
Too much energy in your country
Is spent developing the mind
Instead of the heart
Develop the heart
Be compassionate
Not just with your friends
But with everyone
Be compassionate
Work for peace
In your heart
And in the world
Work for peace
And I say again
Never give up
No matter what is going on around you
Never give up. (http://www.tibetwrites.com/_nevergiveup_)

This has been the message of the Dalai Lama from the very first days of exile. Never give up one’s struggle, gather energy in one’s heart to fight, develop compassion for the world around and never give up the struggle whatever may happen to you.

Exile is an experience. It is a prism which refracts life experiences so as to produce a whole rainbow of them through the multiple poems of the exile poets. Exile is always the painful experience which the Tibetans have felt over the years. But at the same time it is a creative force which holds the Tibetan community together all these years. It has geared up the protests worldwide against the oppressor. It has created in the Tibetans of all generations the will to fight and never
to give up the struggle for freedom. As the Dalai Lama’s poetic message runs they are not going to give this struggle up even though much is going to change around them.