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Viewing embeddedness and ethnic-solidarity in economics of exchange: reflections from economic and cultural practices of Tibetan community in India

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ABSTRACT

Karl Polanyi argues that the discipline of economics has emerged from the observations of human beings and their practices existing in a society. Since humans are perceived primarily as social beings rather than economic ones, embeddedness is a necessary and basic condition of the economy. This paper is an attempt to observe and understand the inter-sectional application of these concepts of embeddedness and ethnic solidarity, in the socio-economic context of the Tibetan refugee community residing in India. Our study’s fieldwork was focused on observing the functioning of the local Tibetan economy in McLeodganj (Dharamshala), where two Tibetan knowledge systems: the Thangka art and the Tibetan healing system were closely studied, reflecting Tibetan culture, and the community’s effort to preserve and promote these knowledge systems in different economic forms.

Introduction

The intricate relationship between an economy and society has been emphasized upon by Karl Polanyi through his concept of ‘Embeddedness.’ Polanyi argues that the discipline of economics has emerged from the observations of human beings and their practices existing in the society.\textsuperscript{1} Because of the social nature of the humans, embeddedness becomes a necessary and basic condition for the economy. Specific organizations and institutions, and ultimately the economy as a whole, need to be understood as parts of larger, historically derived, institutional, or social structures. In other words, Polanyi emphasizes on the subtle need to understand the economic structure in context to the social order in which it is embedded.\textsuperscript{2}

The (social) order prevailing in a society varies across communities and is determined by a community’s values, culture, political environment and history (to mention a few). For instance, an immigrant community would strive to maintain their own socio-cultural
roots and identity even in a foreign land. They are seen to remain closely knit together and to some extent isolated from mainstream society for mutual protection and comfort. Such communities remain driven and collectively committed by a need to preserve and promote their ethical and social values as part of their social arrangements. The economic framework often emerging from such a social order’s functioning is not motivated by profit but by the need to protect their ethnicity and identity. When such solidarity is evident in the economic framework of an ethnic community, we call this ethnic solidarity.

Given this background, this paper tries to analyze the economic framework and explore the embeddedness of the Tibetan community in India which is influenced by the social cohesion existing within the community. For this purpose, the research was taken up in McLeodganj (Dharamshala)—the hub and the capital city for Tibetans residing in exile in India. To analyze the economy of the Tibetan refugee community in McLeodganj, some of the prominent commodities were identified to study the functioning of the local Tibetan markets in Dharamshala. The locally produced Thangka painting and the medical service of Tibetan healing were found to be synonymous with Tibetan culture, history and social values and were used as knowledge case-tools to analyze the extent of embeddedness of Tibetan cultural identity within the distributive networks of local Tibetan market. Because of their historical connect and strong cultural affinity, Thangka art and the Tibetan healing system cannot be simply viewed as commodities, but as concrete knowledge systems (preserved and protected for hundreds of years now). This paper studies the intersectional application of the concepts of embeddedness and ethnic solidarity within Tibetan community in India through these two knowledge systems.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 provides details on our methodology. Section 3 elaborates upon the key concepts used in the study such as embeddedness, ethnic solidarity and the correlation between the two. Section 4 elaborates upon the observations made with respect to the two knowledge systems—Thangka and Tibetan healing system. Section 5 focuses on the inference gathered from the observations made in respect with the two knowledge systems. Section 6 provides the conclusion of the paper while tracking further areas of research from the scope of our analysis. [See Figure 1]

**Methodology**

Methodologically, by adopting an ethnocentric, qualitative approach, we analyze how both these knowledge systems have been used by the community to preserve and strengthen the Tibetan identity. Since the paper delves into understanding the economic sociology of the market that is deeply embedded in its society, a participatory observer-based ethnographic approach has been adopted to understand the solidarity prevailing within this ethnic community. In this approach that involved long oral conversations, face to face interactions, we focused on understanding the traditional customs, cultural propriety from the shared perspectives of Tibetan people.

The concept of embeddedness is ethnographically observed to understand how the community accords more importance to the social networks within the community instead of the economic gains that markets seek to otherwise accrue. The participatory observation method helped to understand how the knowledge systems of Thangka and
Tibetan healing system have been used by the community to preserve, strengthen and promote their identity along with a conscious effort made to educate future generations to learn and make them aware of the value of these knowledge systems and practices. Spending weeks of time observing on how the Thangka art in Norbulingka Institute is created and the traditional healing is practiced by trained medical practitioners, we also developed an understanding on the culture of the Tibetan community and how it plays a major role in influencing their economic activities.

Figure 1. (clockwise) Thang ka painting mounted on silk cloth. Applique Thangka at Norbulingka Institute’s temple. A closer look of an Applique Thangka.
The idea of exploring the community in McLeodganj was based on the observations and inferences drawn from initial conversations in Majnuka Tilla, a Tibetan refugee colony in the northern part of New Delhi. This formed the basis for our later research in McLeodganj. The main target areas of the study were the institutes or centres specific to the creation and practice of knowledge systems including the Norbulingka Institute, Men Tseeckhang, Tushita Healing Centre, etc. (elaborated in subsections 4.1 and 4.2). The interactions and observations backed by secondary references were analyzed to study the subject through the broader conceptual framework.

During the course of the primary research that involved interaction with the community members, the team faced various methodological and logistical challenges. Linguistic barriers for the research team were the main challenge in being able to understand the indigenous texts made available to us and inhibited our ability to interact with community members in a more seamless manner. It was for this principal reason that this particular study, in nature and scope, remains limited to the analyses of two knowledge systems.

**Literature review**

The field observations were interpreted with the help of research papers that aided in establishing a background understanding of the two knowledge systems selected for the study. Philippa Russell while reviewing the work of David Jackson and Janice Jackson has provided a crisp overview of the Thangka paintings, techniques and preservation which paves the way for establishing this art form as a knowledge system and not as merely a commodity.

Similarly, Eric McGukin in a study on the Thangka art and Tourism in Dharamshala has captured the preservation and evolution of Thangka paintings as a result of tourism and increased inter-connectedness of the world. Nupur Pathak has analyzed the Tibetan healing system through the cultural lens that provides a detailed understanding of how the traditional Tibetan medicinal practices are deeply rooted in the Tibetan cultural values and belief systems. This study facilitates the understanding of the way in which the Tibetan community has preserved their medical knowledge system while at the same time keeping it relevant in modern times, thus establishing a concrete knowledge base for the same.

Karl Polanyi, a renowned economic historian of the 20th century, introduced the idea of *embeddedness* in his prominent work ‘The Great Transformation’. Polanyi argued that the functioning of an economy could not be understood in isolation from the social world in which it was *embedded*. It was in his work that he analysed the consequences of eighteenth and nineteenth-century expansion of capitalism specifically the effort to create an economic sphere increasingly separate from non-economic institutions that would function only to maximize profit. Polanyi argued that before the nineteenth century the economic system had been conceived as a part of the broader society governed by social customs and norms as much as by market principles of profit and exchange. The rise of capitalism, however, involved political efforts to de-link the economy from this social environment. However, this dis-embedding of the economy necessarily meant changing its social environment and, thus, society.
The concept of embeddedness has acquired great analytical precision over the years as it has been analyzed and referred by various thinkers. It was due to this concept that the social relations acquired great relevance with respect to explaining market behavior.\textsuperscript{10} The study by Granovetter\textsuperscript{11} provided us direction and scope to establish interlinkages between embeddedness and ethnic solidarity. Several studies by Bisht\textsuperscript{12} and Le Houerou\textsuperscript{13} have helped in building the conceptual framework for the analysis of the embeddedness of the Tibetan economy in the strong social network prevailing in the community in India. The Tibetan community in India has been striving for five decades to maintain a balance between preserving its social behaviour, norms and cultural history away from homeland (Tibet) while adapting to the conditions of a foreign land (in India). In the following section, we provide a brief history of the Tibetan community in India (Dharamshala) that provides an understanding on various contexts including historical, social, and religious and politics that has helped in shaping the lives of Tibetan community in the country.

\textbf{A glance at Tibetan community in India (Mcleodganj, Dharamshala)}

Tibetan refugees first arrived in India after the uprising in 1959 against Chinese occupation. They followed the Dalai Lama after his escape from Lhasa through the Himalayan Mountain passes. Tens of thousands of these refugees arrived in India – exhausted, sick and impoverished in search of shelter and safety. These refugees were granted asylum by the then Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru. This was followed by the establishment of refugee camps all over the country. During the rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees, Dharamshala in northern India became a prime location where a large part of the community found their home. They were given the unused land of the twin towns known as Dharamshala and McLeod Ganj. It became the headquarters of the Tibetan government in exile, called Central Tibet Administration (CTA) and the seat of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

McLeod Ganj is a very small hill station in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, which roughly has two main streets, these streets are packed with handicraft and souvenir shops selling products that represent the cultural values of Tibetans, and hotels and restaurants offering various cuisines to the tourists. One of the main streets is known as the Temple road, where people go to visit mainly the Dalai Lama temple and the monasteries surrounding the area. The place is crowded with Buddhist monks and tourists. Although McLeod Ganj doesn’t have any historical monuments, the famous attraction for the people is the Namgyal Monastery and the residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama known as ‘Tsung La Khang’. McLeod Ganj also has a famous museum, established for the promotion and preservation of the Tibetan books and manuscripts, and cultural artifacts such as Thangka paintings.

Developed with the help from the government of India, McLeodganj facilitated the establishment of basic infrastructure in the form of schools, agricultural cooperatives, handicrafts, restaurants, hotels, and monasteries. With time, McLeod Ganj started to develop and transform into a prime tourist and pilgrim location. Despite being a refugee community, the Tibetans have managed to preserve their culture, religion and language. This is very much evident in the way the towns of McLeod Ganj and Dharamshala have been set up. Even so that McLeod Ganj is often referred to as ‘Little Lhasa’ named after the Tibetan capital.
For most forcefully displaced people in different parts of the world, it becomes a challenge to preserve their identity in the face of such adversity. Their past lives, especially under the pressures of the new place, essentially submerge into the new demands and new challenges posed for their survival. In this regard, however, the Tibetan refugees who sought asylum in India have been remarkable in preserving their identity and cultural values. The establishment of miniature prototypes of Tibet in these settlements is an example of this. The primary reason behind this is the leadership of the Dalai Lama. As the supreme leader of the Tibetan people, he possesses a clear understanding of the religious foundations of Tibet and its institutions.

The great compassion towards the spirit of Tibet and its people enabled him to provide strong leadership to those who migrated and keep them united in the face of adversity. It is through his leadership that the Tibetans that settled as refugees in India and have managed to successfully maintain their distinct cultural and religious identity even far from home. It is a unique situation that has demonstrated the vitality of culture and religion in the community. Religion, therefore, plays an important role in the lives of the Tibetan people. In his book, Seven Years in Tibet, Heinrich Harrier, an Austrian adventurer and mountaineer, who spent seven years in Tibet, observed that 'The daily life of Tibetans is ordered by religious belief. Pious texts are constantly on their lips; prayer-wheels turn without ceasing; prayer-flags wave on the roofs of houses and the summits of the mountain passes. The life of the people is regulated by the divine will, whose interpreters the Lamas are. Before anything is undertaken, they must test the omens. The gods must be unceasingly entreated, placated or thanked.'

The Tibetan refugee community has continuously strived for preserving their identity and satisfying their needs in an unfamiliar territory by organizing itself around a strong framework of solidarity. This strong inter-personal network emerging out of the dire need to preserve their identity and culture became the driving force for the community. This network is thus so crucial that it plays a pivotal role in deciding their livelihoods and business practices. Business is carried out within the community and through the community. This means that the economic activities are carried out as a result of solidarity amongst organisations, institutions, and business practices. The section below analyses the existence of solidarity within the Tibetan society by observing the two prominent business practices prevalent within the community in Dharamshala. Thangka Art and the Tibetan healing system cannot be simply viewed as a means of making money.

**Observations**

**Thangka Art**

Thangka is a Tibetan word that stands for ‘recorded message’, that depicts a premonition seen by a Lama, popularly known as the master. The details of the message are expressed by the master in the form of a story which is then expressed through art. It is usually produced in the form of a painting. Each piece is based on a concept and has a story to narrate. These stories are inspired by the core philosophy of Buddhism which focuses on attaining salvation from the cycle of rebirth. Thangkas depict the Buddhist
deities, and their teachings through the figures, symbols, and motifs. The main themes revolve around the principal deities of Buddhism like Buddha, Avalokiteshvara and Tara. In this way, Thangkas are intended to convey iconographic information in a pictorial manner.

The art is originated from Nepal and parts of India. But over the years it is known to stand synonymous with Tibetans. It is essential to analyse the entrenchment of this knowledge structure within the Tibetan community to affirmatively conclude the existence of such a synonymity. For such an analysis, the Norbulingka Institute in Dharamshalawas chosen as the area of study. Founded in 1995 by Kelsang and Kim Yeshi, it is dedicated to the preservation of the Tibetan culture. The institute provides training to the artists, produces the Tibetan artefacts and also sells them. It specializes in Thangkas, wood painting, wood carving, weaving, tailoring and statue making. The workshops are open to visitors and one can interact with the artists to learn more about the art and its techniques. At this institute, Menri, a type of Thangka is particularly practiced, which is characterized by life-like colours and a focus on a central figure surrounded by significant events or people in his/her life. All the stages involved in the manufacturing and selling of Thangkas were carefully analysed to decide whether these paintings can be used as prominent identity markers for the community.

A Thangka can be created either using paints or appliqué work. The preparation of a Thangka painting is an elaborate process. The painting and the process involved draws from the core ideology of Buddhism which is also strongly reflected in the Tibetan culture. To begin with, the process of becoming a Thangka artist involves a rigorous and long-drawn training process. The primary requirement is proficiency in the Buddhist language and teachings which are required to be proven through an entrance exam. The students then learn to sketch during the course of three years and also go through several exams to gauge the improvement. After three years of rigorous training in sketching, they have to take successive courses on paintings. After the rigorous training and practice, the artist is allowed to work on a Thangka. It must be noted that the artist is not an inventor but a medium to deliver the ‘recorded message’. The outline of the Thangka is prepared by a senior artist on the basis of the teachings of the Lamas. This outline is then traced onto the canvas and the artist is allowed to make minor changes for the beautification of the piece. So, it is imperative for the artist to stick to the guidelines laid by the master for the correct delivery of the higher teachings being reflected through the artwork. On the basis of the message being delivered from these paintings, they can also be used for meditative and healing purposes.

A thangka painting can take anywhere between four to ten months to finish depending upon the size and intricacy.

‘Lobshang, one of the artists at the institute mentioned that the process that seems tedious and taxing to the common man is rather meditative for them. He said that he feels privileged to be chosen for such a job because it involves delivery of the teachings of Buddha for the greater good. He also mentioned how he takes pride in the fact that these paintings that reflect their culture and religion hold great value in the market.’ Each stage of preparation is thus reflective of the traditional practices that have been followed since generations. The emphasis is more on the preservation and continuation of the knowledge system than the commercial value of the product. [See Figures 2, 3]
Appliqué Thangka as depicted in Figure 4 is another way of creating Thangkas by using precious silk instead of paints. It is also a sacred art and follows the iconography for the Buddhist deities as laid down in Buddhist scriptures. A piece created using applique work has hundreds of individual pieces sewn together. Every individual piece is outlined by a border of horsehair wrapped in silk thread. This type of embroidery, called couching, is different from other methods where the design is not embroidered directly onto the fabric, but rather, the cord of horsehair and silk is ‘couched’ over the
fabric to create the design. The complete layout comes out as a layered structure which provides strength and durability. This procedure and intricate designing take months of work.

One of the evident differences between the two techniques of Thangka, observed at Norbulingka was that the appliqué Thangkas had many artists working on one composition. It was like an assembly line production where individual artists had different works like tracing the figures from the masterpiece, cutting the individual pieces, couching the silk-wrapped horsehair, finishing the individual cut pieces, sewing the pieces together to form the pieces and then mounting it on the silk cloth. While for the painting technique, an individual artist completes the whole painting.

On the basis of the primary observations from the Norbulingka institute and Tibetan monasteries, the walls of which are adorned with Thangka paintings and Applique Thangka, it can be concluded that this form of art is an identity for the community. Traditionally, Thangka paintings are not only valued for their aesthetic beauty, but primarily for meditational practices. Practitioners use it to develop a clear visualization of a particular deity, strengthening their concentration, and forging a link between

Figure 4. (Clockwise) The individual pieces of Applique Thang ka being ‘couched’. Different pieces stitched together to form a figure. The workshop for Applique Thangka at Norbulingka Institute, each artist working on different stages of same Thang ka.
themselves and the deity. Historically, Thangkas were also used as teaching tools to convey the lives of various masters. A teacher or lama would travel around giving talks on dharma, carrying with him large Thangka scrolls to illustrate his stories. Therefore, Thangka has become an integral part of their religious practices.

Over the years, Thangka art has created value for itself. The value lies in the message that the artwork delivers and the immense effort involved in creating the piece. Tibetans have continued to invest time, energy and resources in the creation of Thangkas since decades and continue to function in the same manner. This shows that Tibetans have indulged in the creation of Thangkas not for the purpose of economic gain but mainly to propagate their identity and culture. The monetary valuation of Thangkas is not done on the basis of demand and supply but depending upon the intrinsic value of the item. Thangka cannot be viewed as a separate commodity; it must be seen as an entire knowledge system that is flourishing because of the solidarity and coordination within the members of the Tibetan community.

The demand for Thangkas in India has recently picked up due to increase in tourism and the use of internet. The growing supply of its replicas in the local market of McLeod Ganj is indicative of the growing demand. These replicas are usually the printed and framed copies of the authentic piece. A different procedure is followed to create these as compared to the original Thangkas. The cost of the replicated Thangka is way less than the original piece. These kinds of Thangka paintings can prove to be highly beneficial for Tibetan as they can make huge profits by selling these replicas. However, as indicated in the study by Jackson,16 most of the Tibetans, especially monks opposed the trade of such replicas. They believe that Thangka art is much more than just a commodity of exchange, it has a spiritual value attached to it. The strong reluctance in the commercialization of the Thangka art is reflective of the fact that the community gives precedence to their culture over economic gains. By giving precedence to their culture, they also accord importance to the effort put in by the fellow Tibetans in creating these paintings.

**Tibetan Healing System**

The roots of the Tibetan medical and healing traditions can be traced back to the advent of civilization in Tibet. This system of healing finds its origin in the indigenous practices of the early religion of Tibet and in the healing techniques deeply ingrained in the cultural beliefs in evil spirits, charms, amulets and consultation with the indigenous practitioners. This strong medical system unique to the Tibetan community is influenced by Buddhist philosophy and its teachings. The Buddhist philosophy has encapsulated a profound and extensive understanding of the human body, mind and soul. The Tibetan healing system for this reason understands health in a holistic manner.17 It goes beyond the basic understanding of a body’s biological system, it encompasses the mind, spirit, ethical and lifestyle practices of an individual for a proper and holistic healing. Therefore, in the Tibetan community health is just not a physical concept; they also equally consider the spiritual, social, emotional and mental well-being of a person. Traditionally, these practices are inherited as a family culture, and hence are deeply engrained into their culture.

The Tibetan medical system in pre-modern Tibet was an indigenous system of healing practiced by the indigenous practitioners. With a history that can be traced back
approximately 2500 years, the Tibetan healing system known as the Sowa Rigpa is one of the oldest known traditional medicinal systems. As a system of medicine, it consists of aspects of ancient Indian Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, ancient Greek-Persian medicine, as well as the underlying Bon-Shamanism of ancient Tibet. Combined together with the spiritual values of Buddhism, this system stands as a separate branch of healing.\textsuperscript{18}

Another branch of the Tibetan healing tradition is the meditative practices exclusive to the Tibetan culture. These meditative practices embody the healing of the mind and the soul with the help of the spiritual values of Buddhism and the teachings of Buddhism. The practitioners of Tibetan healing system have traditionally identified contemplative practices such as visualizations, mantras, recitation of deity names, breathing and movement exercises, refinement of subtle essences (qi, prana, lung), absorption of the four elements (water, fire, earth, wind) and abiding in emptiness as beneficial to one’s physical and mental health.\textsuperscript{19} These approaches to healing have been spread by famed monks who work as missionaries, translators, advisors across the globe. This ancient practice has been adapted and elaborated all around the world in an attempt to spread and popularise this particular system.

The Tibetan community in India especially in Dharamshala has made efforts in preserving this knowledge system. Many institutions have been established around the country and the world to spread this practice. In India, institutions like Men-TseeKhang in Dharamshala, the astro-medical institute, meditation centres and retreats and various other Tibetan healing clinics have been established by the Tibetans.

The Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamkot (near McLeod Ganj), for example, is a centre for the study and practice of Buddhism healing practices from the Tibetan Mahayana tradition. They provide a wide range of courses ranging from short-term courses for a few weeks to long-term courses spread over the course of a few months. The long-term courses formally train the practitioners to become trainers and guides to others. These courses are the formally institutionalised like the other professional degrees with a rigorous course structure essentially embedded in Buddhist teachings and practices. Their programs are not only based in Dharamshala but are also offered abroad in countries like the United States, Poland, and Hungary, etc. The centre thus plays an important role in popularising the Tibetan meditation practice as well as the Buddhist spiritual teachings to the people in and outside the Tibetan community.

By establishing such centers, the community strives to sustain the practices and also attach a value to the practice. The important aspect to keep in mind, however, is that although the practice of providing meditative and teaching services has got monetary aspect to them, the socio-cultural and religious aspect can be seen to be of primary importance. This can be pointed out by the fact the induction courses are rigorous and the trainings include Buddhist studies and disciplined routines. The Men Tsee Khang, a Tibetan Medical and Astro-Science Institute, states that their main objective is to preserve, promote and practice Sowa Rigpa, the ancient Tibetan system of medicine, astronomy and astrology. It also aims to improve the health and sanitation of the refugees in particular and the public in general and to establish dispensaries in order to provide accessible health care to the people regardless of caste, creed or colour.

The effective functionality of any system is dependent upon the efficient working and coordination of the people involved in the system. The Tibetan refugee community is no
During the visit to the Karmapa Monastery in Dharamshala, it was observed that the place was set up to serve as a residential and teaching institute for monks of all ages. Monks live there for several years to complete their Tibetan Buddhist studies and attain proper qualifications to further practice and teach people who come to the monastery for learning the Tibetan practices. The entire system functions in the form of a hierarchical level with a chain of command in place so as to ensure the proper working of the system.

While the primary focus of the teachers and the administration of these places is to facilitate the integration of people into the community and its teachings, at the same time they also help in preserving their identity and culture. The entire system, therefore, works in a coordinative setup. In the Men-Tsee-Khang Institute also, education and higher studies in the fields of Tibetan Medicine and Astrology, research and collaboration with scholars and institutes in India and abroad between different healing systems are promoted. It is therefore evident that the entire system functions on the key feature of effective coordination amongst the members of the community.

The embeddedness is therefore evident in this cultural knowledge system. It must be noted that services offered to the clients from all across the world, such as the adoption, practice and appreciation of the practices do require an understanding of Buddhist and Tibetan culture. This enables wider propagation of this particular knowledge system. Thus, Tibetan healing practices reflect the embeddedness of social norms and values with economic value, and the solidarity that exists within the community (across the world).

[See Figures 5, 6]

**Interpretations**

Competition and profit maximization have been considered as the two most vital elements responsible for the functioning of a market. However, the two knowledge case study of the Tibetan community provides a different outlook on the effective
functioning of an economy. Observations made through the study showed how the economy of a community can function and flourish through its social networks by giving precedence to culture and social values, over profit.

The deep entrenchment of the economy within its social structure is evident from the observations made through the process of creation and distribution of Thangka art and the provision of Tibetan healing practices. Immense effort has been put in by the Tibetan community to create an intricate market for these knowledge systems because they stand synonymous to the Tibetan cultural identity. An increase in demand for the product and service would translate into the propagation of the Tibetan culture and strengthening of their identity. Internal networks, the established institutions and the social structure play a pivotal role in designing the economic framework for such an ethnic community.

The effort and commitment of the community is commendable. People from all ages were seen to be taking up these practices such as learning Thangka art or involving themselves with Tibetan healing. The rigorous procedure to create the product or impart the service makes the culture maintain its uniqueness. The continued existence and acceptance of these systems are the results of the community’s greater efforts to establish their identity. The inferences drew from this study provides an insight into the distinct economic framework prevailing within the Tibetan community.

The community’s attempt at preserving and maintaining the cultural identity through these practices is reflective of their struggle to establish their identity both in their
homeland and alien lands. To ensure the same, a strong social network has been established within the community. This network has become significant in mobilizing people, resources and as a source of employment. The refugee community is heavily dependent on this network to ensure their livelihoods in the host country. The interpersonal relationship established as a result of this network helps them in maintaining and strengthening their identity and fulfill their economic objectives.

Conclusion

The paper provides an overarching framework of exploring local economies of different yet similar communities. In the paper, the economic structure of the (Tibetan) community, which is majorly influenced by its social and cultural networks, is analysed through the lens of embeddedness as propounded by Karl Polanyi. An ethnographic inquiry helped us in analyzing the economic practices of exchange within the Tibetan refugee community in Mcleodganj (Dharamshala) by studying the Tibetan knowledge systems through two commodities – Thangka Art and the Tibetan Healing system.

From the observations drawn by analyzing these two commodities, we found the social order and collective interests of the Tibetan community overpower the profit maximization motive that is common in the functioning of any economy. The member of the community does not compete to sell their products but coordinate to endure solidarity which is aimed at propagating their culture and conserving their identity. The embeddedness in the economy, therefore, allows the participants to ensure the continued existence of solidarity within the society.

The case reflection of embedded cultural roots in the socio-economic conduct of the Tibetan community presents itself as a fascinating inquiry in understanding the interwoven concepts of embeddedness and ethnic solidarity, while offering a detailed case of studying the intricate relationship between economy and society. The observations and analysis from this study can be replicated in studying and exploring (cultural) embeddedness in context to other social groups as well. We hope this study provides a research opportunity to delve into the future area of cross-cultural research and understand the extent to which embeddedness of culture and social values shape/influence the economic practices of a community and its interests.

Notes

3. Beckert, “The social order of markets.”
4. The idea of embeddedness as propounded by Polanyi was of immense importance in the development of the New Economic Sociology, an idea that aims towards examining the linkages and interdependencies of economic phenomena and organisations and other social structures. New Economic Sociology has become relatively popular in the past few decades, it owes its root to a number of studies dating from the early 1980s. The work on embeddedness by Granovetter has been instrumental in developing the concept of New Economic Sociology. His work gave the concept of embeddedness great analytical precision by insisting that all economic actions are
embedded in networks of social relations. The network approach associated particularly with the works of Mark Granovetter and Harrison White, emphasizes the social embeddedness of market actors. The approach explains economic outcomes based on the structure of social networks and the positions individual nodes hold within these structures. According to network analysts, the structures of social relationships are more important for explaining the behaviour of market actors than ethical attitudes or institutional arrangements.

5. This pilot study was conducted to understand the unique economic setup of the Tibetan community. To understand this, the team focused on two sectors within the hospitality business-accommodation and travel bookings. The functioning of these two sectors was observed and analyzed in a great detail to comprehend if their economy is deeply embedded in the social order of the community, tracing evidence for the existence of a strong sense of ethnic solidarity. To decipher whether this trend is specific to the region of Majnu-ka-Tilla or is relevant across the community, the scope of the study was expanded to Mcleodganj (Dharamshala), which is the hub and capital city for Tibetans residing in India. However, the hospitality sector studied in the first phase couldn’t be covered in Dharamshala. Since, Mcleodganj is a prominent tourist destination; the hospitality sector is quite diversified with respect to both service providers and the customers making it difficult to study the concept of embeddedness.


9. See note 1 above.


11. Ibid.


14. See official website of Norbulingka Institute, webpage named “Thang ka Painting.”


17. See note 8 above.


19. Ibid.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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