



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Negotiating statelessness:
Tibetan youth, citizenship,
and exile politics in India*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker :

Kalyani Yeola

5 March 2025

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Speaker: Ms. Kalyani Yeola, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Date: 5 March 2025

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar focused on the politics surrounding the lives of Tibetans living in exile in India. Kalyani Yeola described the founding of the Tibetan exile community, and stated that it stemmed from the 1959 Chinese occupation of Tibet, which had led to the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans seeking refuge in India. India's decision to grant asylum, while not offering citizenship, was rooted in the belief that statelessness would maintain the integrity of the Tibetan cause and the aspiration for a future return to Tibet.
- This historical context has created a unique situation where generations of Tibetans have been born and raised in India, yet remain in a state of legal limbo. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) has maintained a stance that discourages the acquisition of Indian citizenship, emphasising the importance of preserving a distinct Tibetan identity and maintaining the focus on the struggle for Tibetan independence.
- While discouraging Indian citizenship the CTA has, at times, facilitated and encouraged Tibetan migration to Western countries, where acquiring citizenship is seen as acceptable. According to the speaker, the rationale behind this appears to be the belief that a global Tibetan diaspora with Western citizenship would be more effective in advocating for the Tibetan cause on the international stage.
- Such an approach, the speaker noted, creates a degree of tension as many Tibetan youth, born and raised in India, feel a strong connection to the country and desire legal rights and opportunities. This has led to feelings of inequality and frustration among young Tibetans in India, who feel constrained by their stateless status and limited opportunities.

- Ms. Yeola highlighted that Tibetan individuals have engaged in legal battles to challenge their statelessness, seeking recognition of their rights in India. Landmark court rulings have established pathways for some Tibetans born in India to obtain Indian citizenship. These legal struggles underscore the desire of Tibetan youth to secure legal recognition and access to basic rights, such as education, employment, and property ownership.
- The Tibetan youth are actively challenging the CTA's stance and reshaping exile politics. They are engaging in entrepreneurship, seeking informal employment, and utilising alternative documentation to overcome restrictions. They are also leveraging digital platforms and social media to raise awareness, mobilise support, and create new narratives of Tibetan identity. Furthermore, they are engaging in grassroots activism, lobbying Indian politicians, and forming alliances with local organisations to advocate for their rights.
- There is a noticeable shift in the way younger generations of Tibetans perceive their identity and engage in political activism. In Ms. Yeola's assessment, many Tibetan youth view Indian citizenship as a pragmatic step, and not as a rejection of their Tibetan identity. They are seeking to balance the preservation of their Tibetan identity with the practical benefits of Indian citizenship, viewing it as a means of escaping statelessness and enhancing their ability to advocate for their cause.

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