



## China's Minorities: State of Research in India

Tshering Chonzom, PhD

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## INTRODUCTION

This research paper is prepared with a view to give a representative picture about the state of research in India as far as the study of China's minorities and minority issues is concerned. The research involved collecting data on the following aspects: major scholars affiliated to any of the two formal academic institutions (universities and research institutes/think tanks) in Delhi and the major writings published by them. In that, it excludes scholars and writings by those outside the formal academic framework. This limited, but focused approach, also helps to understand the degree of emphasis on the subject by the given institutions.

Within this, the research includes data about the number of events organized by these institutions on China's minority issues. Owing to the lack of a centralized system of documentation of events in a university system comprising of several centers and departments that conduct events autonomously, this research has collated data only with respect to events conducted by think tanks in Delhi. Apart from web-based search, in this case, data was collected through email correspondence as much as possible.

In the due course of data collection, it was evident that research on the subject of China's minorities and minority related issues are minimal. Further, the paucity of research on the subject and the unbalanced emphasis on Tibet, and to some extent, Xinjiang, whether in the universities or think tanks, provided the incentive to look for additional sources. Thus, the paper includes supplementary data on the number of research (thesis and dissertations) successfully undertaken by students in the major universities in Delhi leading to the award of respective Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. Such an approach offers an interesting preview into the role of the university faculty members and departments, where the research is undertaken, in shaping the discourse on the given subject over a given period. Such an exercise also helped to identify, where possible, the academic backgrounds of some of the current scholars and experts. As a corollary, it made sense to see how many universities were teaching courses on the given subject.

Since this is the first attempt of its kind, the data collection is restricted to Delhi based institutions, with the underlying assumption that much of the work on the subject of China's minorities, which inevitably focuses on Tibet, would be concentrated in the political capital of India

## SCHOLARS AND UNIVERSITIES IN DELHI

Of the universities in Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi University (DU) and Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD), have about 15 teachers who are actively involved in writing and speaking on China's minority issues. Among them, about seven could be considered specialists given the fact that a Chinese minority group forms their primary research focus.

Four of them are from the Centre for Inner Asian Studies (CIAS), School of International Studies (SIS), JNU: K Warikoo<sup>1</sup> specializes in Xinjiang and trans-himalayan related issues. Sharad K Soni specializes in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia related issues. Mahesh Ranjan Debata specializes in Xinjiang related issues. Tsetan Namgyal specializes in Indo-Tibetan Studies and Buddhist studies. Dawa Norbu, from the same centre, who dominated scholarship on Tibetan studies in India since the 1990s, passed away in 2006, leaving a void in this field. Hira Paul Gangnegi from the Department of Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi specializes in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhist culture. Abanti Bhattacharya, from DEAS, DU, studies the two minorities, Uighurs and Tibetans under her larger specialization on Chinese nationalism. She was earlier with the IDSA. Honey Oberoi Vahali from the School of Human Studies, AUD specializes in Tibetan refugee studies.

Debata and Bhattacharya are alumni of JNU and Namgyal and Vahali are alumni of DU. Debata and Vahali have both published books on their respective areas of specialization.

## COURSES IN UNIVERSITIES

Even though there are about 15 teachers who write and speak on the subject, very few have gone on to include it in the curricula of their respective universities. The CIAS at JNU is the only Centre that has an integrated approach to teaching courses on China's minorities, but within the overall ambit of Central Asian studies. Notably, five out of its 13 thrust areas<sup>2</sup> deal with China's minorities, namely Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia. There is a specific thrust on 'China's nationalities policy' with respect to the three groups. Tibet and Xinjiang receive special attention concerning 'ethnicity and religion', 'society, culture and politics', and 'cross border trade and linkages'. There is a specific focus on Xinjiang with respect to 'religious extremism and terrorism'. The Centre offers two courses at the MPhil level entitled: 'Society, Culture and Politics in Xinjiang' and 'Society, Culture and Politics of Tibet'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jnu.ac.in/FacultyStaff/ShowProfile.asp?SendUserName=kwarikoo> (accessed on 16 June 2015).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jnu.ac.in/sis/cias/ThrustAreas.asp> (accessed on 16 June 2015).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jnu.ac.in/sis/cias/Programme.asp> (accessed on 22 June 2015).

The Centre for East Asian Studies (CEAS), SIS, JNU, at the MPhil level, offers a course entitled ‘Chinese Political System’, which has one section titled ‘Centre-Periphery Conflict: Ethnicity and region’.<sup>4</sup>

The Department of East Asian Studies (DEAS), Faculty of Social Sciences (SSS), DU, offers two Master of Arts courses: One titled ‘Society in East Asia’ has 9 themes, of which, the 9<sup>th</sup> is titled ‘Ethnicity and Identity’. Another titled ‘Society in China’, has 11 themes, of which, the 10<sup>th</sup> is titled ‘Race and Ethnicity’.<sup>5</sup>

The AUD does not have a Centre or Department of East Asian Studies nor does it have a Centre for Inner Asian Studies; it also does not have a focus on religious/Buddhist studies, under which the Chinese minorities – the Tibetans, Inner Mongolians and Uighurs – are categorized in DU and JNU. Vahali hopes to introduce a course on the psychosocial issues in the lives of refugees, with a particular emphasis on Tibetan refugees, as her own work and experience has been with Tibetan refugees.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, while there are hardly any faculty members in Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) who are actively studying China’s minority issues, one of its special centres, the Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies (CDMS), at the Masters level, offers a course entitled ‘Aspects of Social Exclusion’, which includes Tibetans as an integral aspect of its general theme on ‘Groups at the risk of being excluded – Religious; Racial; Caste; Gender; Ethnic; Class; Regional; Cultural; Language; Disabled; Migrant and Refugee’.<sup>7</sup>

The Department of Buddhist Studies, DU, teaches numerous courses on Tibetan Buddhist literature, language, art, philosophy, esoterism and so on.<sup>8</sup>

## THESIS/DISSERTATIONS IN UNIVERSITIES

The paper has only compiled data from two universities – JNU and DU – with the assumption that JMI and AUD would not have awarded degrees for research on China’s minority issues. Primarily, because both the universities do not have any specialized faculty (except for AUD which has one faculty as mentioned earlier), nor others who are writing and speaking on these issues. The data from JNU (below) shows that one of the reasons for the large number of PhDs and MPhils from

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.jnu.ac.in/SIS/CEAS/ch\\_po\\_sys.htm](http://www.jnu.ac.in/SIS/CEAS/ch_po_sys.htm) (accessed on 16 June 2015).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.du.ac.in/du/index.php?page=m-a-east-asian-studies> (accessed on 22 June 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence with Honey Oberoi, Professor, AUD, 27-28 April 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Email correspondence with Prashant Negi, Assistant Professor, JMI. Subject in-charge. 16 June 2015.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.du.ac.in/du/uploads/pg-courses/MABuddhist.pdf> (accessed on 26 June 2015).

the university is owing to the research specialization of faculties in the given universities. Also, at both DU and JNU, there are Departments/Centres for East Asian Studies where courses are being taught on China's race and ethnicity, which introduces the students to some of these issues early on. JMI does have a Centre for Chinese Studies but it is a new centre that commenced in 2012-13 and hence, it is too early to include it in the analysis. It would be rare for China's minorities to be studied in other traditional disciplinary departments in JMI. There are two centres in JMI where China's minorities could have fit in – the Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution and Centre for Comparative Religions and Civilizations – however, that has not been the case. The AUD's programmes/departments are differently organized from that of JNU, DU and to some extent, JMI. It is yet to integrate the study of China or its minorities within its largely thematic departments. Much would depend on a student's own background, interest and also the faculty's specialisation and interest.

### ***Jawaharlal Nehru University***

In total, 69 thesis and dissertations have been completed by students in JNU on the subject of China's minorities since the early 1970s. Only one deals with a general theme of minority and is titled 'Chinese communist party policy towards national minorities'. Most of them, 61, are on Tibet related issues. Seven are on Xinjiang related issues.

From 1973 till the late 1980s, about seven thesis/dissertations were successfully completed on Tibet and none on Xinjiang. Research on Xinjiang among the student community in JNU basically began in the early 1990s, notably after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The number of students opting to study Tibet also picked up in the 1990s after the late Prof Dawa Norbu joined the University. He supervised about 30 students between 1989 and 2004. From this, we can deduce that the expertise of the teacher plays a role in increasing the number of students selecting a given topic. However, it is a different question as to how many continue to pursue the subject after the award of their degrees.

It is also interesting to review the centre-wise distribution of thesis/dissertations in JNU. Basically, three Centres at the SIS hosted students with research interest in China's minority issues – the CIAS has awarded 44 degrees; CEAS five (four on Tibet and one on Xinjiang); and CIPOD 8 (seven were in Tibet and one on Xinjiang). Interestingly, the subject received scant attention from the students of traditional social science disciplines at JNU. For instance, only five students completed their MPhil and Phds from political science and history departments of the School of Social Sciences (one in each decade since the 1970s); and a lonely one from the School of Languages. Purportedly, SIS has been the primary bastion of studies on China's minority issues, though it must be clarified that many of the research tended to be interdisciplinary.

## *Delhi University*

The DU has awarded about 17 MPhil/PhD degrees to students who have worked on China's minority related issues. The distribution of topics is more balanced in comparison to JNU, given that two degrees were awarded for research on China's national minority policies and two on other minority related themes; with two and four awards respectively for Xinjiang and Tibet related research. However, majority of the research, that is, seven of them have been undertaken at the Department of Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Arts. The department's mandate circumscribed the nature of research, which mainly tended to revolve around religious aspects of Tibetan Buddhism; except for one with a political overtone, was entitled 'Role of Buddhism in the Tibetan struggle for independence'. An equal number, that is seven MPhil/PhDs were awarded by the DEAS.

### **SCHOLARS AND THINK-TANKS IN DELHI**

29 scholars in about 11 think tanks in Delhi – the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA), Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), Centre for Policy Research (CPR), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), Centre for China Analysis and Strategy (CCAS) and Foundation for Non-Violent Alternatives (FNVA) – focus on China's minority issues. The FNVA and CCAS are the only organisations that focus on Tibet as a part of their primary research objective/mission. Rest of the organisations have a Tibet and Xinjiang focus or a focus on China's minority issues simply owing to the fact that it hosts a scholar studying such an issue. The author went through the websites of the Centre for the Study of Developing Studies (CSDS) and Delhi Policy Group (DPG) too but did not find any focus on China's minority related issues among its scholars, nor any events.

Three of them – the ICS, CAPS and CCAS – have dedicated scholars. Jayadeva Ranade of CCAS, who is also a member of the National Security Advisory Board of the Government of India, writes and speaks regularly on Tibet related issues. His latest book *China Unveiled: Insights Into Chinese Strategic Thinking* (2013) has about eight chapters out of the 32 on Tibet. Debasish Chaudhari and Tshering Chonzom Bhutia from ICS have Xinjiang and Tibet related issues respectively as their primary research areas. Tseyang Lhamu, a young scholar at CAPS is studying contemporary issues inside Tibet. Claude Arpi who regularly speaks and writes on Tibet related issues is on the advisory board of the FNVA. He has also published many books on the issue of Tibet. Another scholar at IDSA, Col P K Gautam, includes Tibet as one of his areas of expertise. Rightly so, he headed the IDSA taskforce that worked on the report titled 'Tibet and India's Security: Himalayan Region, Refugees and Sino-Indian Relations' in 2012. IPCS used to have a dedicated scholar, Bhavna Singh, whose primary area of specialization is Xinjiang. There are a total of about six people who are specialists on either of China's two minority groups – Tibet or Xinjiang.

About 20 scholars out of the 29 in the 11 think tanks are strategic analysts who are studying the Tibet issue as a factor in India-China relations and the border issue, or from the perspective of infrastructure build-up inside Tibet and the implications for India's security.

### **THINK-TANK EVENTS**

Much of the data for this section was collected from the official websites of the think tanks/research institutes listed above and supplemented through email correspondence. The timeline of data collection for the various organizations are uneven. The analysis is according to data availability/archives of respective organisations. Since much of the discussion on Tibet is circumscribed within the China-India relation framework or the border issue, the paper also lists events on these issues, provided a major part of the discussion or presentation is centered on Tibet.

In the last three and half years, ICS has hosted 10 lectures on the minority question in China under the aegis of its weekly Wednesday Seminars. Nine of them were on Tibet-related issues and one on a general subject of China's 'Go West Strategy'. The ICS' annual flagship event, the All India Conference of China Studies (AICCS), which has organized seven conferences annually since 2008, has seen a total of nine presentations on China's minorities in the last four conferences, that is from 2011 onwards.

Interestingly, the IPCS initiated an annual thematic conference entitled 'Inside China: Understanding Contemporary Issues, Challenges and Problems' from 2011 to 2013.<sup>9</sup> The first and second one in 2011 and 2012 had six papers on Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. The third conference in 2013 did not have any presentations on any of the minorities. The IPCS also attempted to start an 'Inside Xinjiang' series of annual seminars – within which, two were held in 2011 and 2012. Another one on Xinjiang was held in 2015, but outside the series. In 2013, the IPCS organized a major workshop titled 'China & its Internal Periphery' in collaboration with JNU and DEAS, DU. While three papers were on the usual themes – Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia; for the first time perhaps, there was a presentation on Guangxi Zhuang, one of the five autonomous regions in China, the other four being, TAR, XUAR, Ningxia-Hui Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

The IDSA, which has about 13 different types of event formats, has organized about two roundtables, one national security lecture and about seven fellows' seminars since 2003. Out of the 10 events, only one was on Xinjiang and the rest were on Tibet – with four particularly on China's infrastructure build-up inside Tibet. The Asian Security Conference (ASC), IDSA's flagship event

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<sup>9</sup> There was no event in 2014.

held annually since 2002 has seen five presentations on Xinjiang and Tibet related issues (three in 2004 and one in 2012).

The ORF, which organizes numerous roundtables, conferences and brainstorming sessions, lists about five events since 2011: one on Tibet related issues and four on issues such as China's western development strategy, rights and group based inequalities in China, and so on.

Since 2008, the ICWA has organized two events in 2012 that include some amount of discussion on China's minorities. The first was a China core group meeting held in September 2009 to assess the CCP's performance in various aspects in the run up to the 18<sup>th</sup> party Congress in end 2012. It had three presentations on China's minorities – on Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.<sup>10</sup> The second was a roundtable discussion organized in collaboration with ICS on the India-China border issue, which had about 14 presentations. Only about one presentation by Col Virender Sahia Verma discussed Tibet in the context of the eastern sector of the border dispute. A few others made passing references to it as an important factor in the dispute during their presentations and also the discussions.

The VIF in the last four years, since 2011, organized three events that were specifically on Tibet related issues and two on the India-China border issue that had Tibet as the major focus of discussions. In the seminar on 'Strategic Posture: Sino-Indian Border' held on 3 September 2012, four out of five papers pertained to China's posture in Tibet with regards to its strategy, infrastructural build-up, PLA Air force and the PLA.

Since 2007, CLAWS has organized three seminars on Tibet related themes – river water flowing from Tibet (2007) and two in 2010 on post-Dalai Lama situation and infrastructure development in Tibet. It organized many events on India-China relationship and the border issue, of which two of them that were held in 2008 and 2010 had presentations by Mohan Guruswamy, which inevitably discussed Tibet's history while discussing the historical background of the border issue.

Two seminars of CAPS in 2014 had one presentation each by Samrat Virk on Tibet factor in India-China relations. It also conducts fellows' seminars – three were by Tseyang Lhamu on Tibet and one on Xinjiang.

Given its primary focus on Tibet, almost all of the 13 or so FNVA events that were held since 2011 have been on Tibet as the primary focus – whether it is in the context of Chinese policies, its

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<sup>10</sup> The ICWA has held many China core group meetings, the details of which are not available on its website. The author was able to note details about this one as she was one of the presenters during the meeting.

relations with the Himalayas or in the context of its importance in terms of security, ecology, water and so on, for India.

### **MAJOR BOOKS IN INDIA SINCE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY**

In total, 12 books have been written on China's minority related issues since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One by Nimmi Kurian from the CPR, titled *India-China Borderlands: Conversations beyond the Centre* (2014), while analyzing the massive state-led developmental efforts in the India-China border regions by the respective central governments, emphasizes the need for focusing on the border people. With the exception of one book on Xinjiang by Mahesh Ranjan Debata (faculty at CIAS, JNU), titled *China's Minorities: Ethnic-Religious Separatism in Xinjiang* (2007), rest of the ten books are on Tibet related issues; among which, five focus on issues pertaining to the Tibetans in exile. Three of the books on Tibet are seminal given that they are outcomes of years of research by the respective authorities in their given fields – *China's Tibet Policy* (2001) by Dawa Norbu and *From Conflict to Conciliation: Tibetan Polity Revisited* (2004) and *Writings on History and Politics* (2011) by Parshottam Mehra – deal with the contentious issue of Sino-Tibetan history. Norbu goes beyond history to analyse a number of issues central to the Tibet question in China, as also Tibet's place in India-China relations and the larger international context. Claude Arpi's book is one of the only books on Sino-Tibetan negotiations, the title of which gives away the thrust of the book – about how the 'negotiations never were'. Two of the books on Tibet have been published by Delhi based think tanks – IDSA and VIF.

Apart from that, a number of chapters have appeared in books that are solely on China or India-China related issues.

### **CONCLUSION**

The data more or less speaks for itself. It is clear that in the research focus of students, university faculty, analysts to think tanks, there is a lop-sided focus on Tibet related issues. Also, many of the scholars and strategic analysts write or speak on Tibet factor in India-China relations. Given Tibet's historical linkages with India and primacy in the India-China border issue, it is certain that a political, security and strategic framework would continue to dominate the study of Tibet in India. In many senses, there is a Tibet question not only in China, but also in India, which explains the increased number of writings and books on the Tibetan exiles.

The emphasis on Tibet has, in effect, stolen the focus away from studying China's other minority groups. At the same time, the important question that arises is – how to approach the study of the different minority groups in China? Is a group specific approach sufficient or even appropriate? In

the Chinese context, this question becomes relevant owing to the political dynamics of nationality/ethnic classification on the formation of the PRC. The Manchus who formed the Qing dynasty of China and incidentally, it was the last Chinese dynasty/empire, did not resort to the majority-minority classification of the people it ruled. For one, the Manchus themselves comprised a minority in terms of numbers.<sup>11</sup> During the Republican era, Chinag Kai Shek forwarded the notion of one Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu*). Only after the formation of the People's Republic of China did China gradually develop into a 'multi-national state' comprising of one Han majority and 55 national minorities. Further, there occurred a shift in official terminology (at least in the English language) since the early 1990s, as the national minorities began to be called ethnic minorities. The term in Chinese, 'minzu', however, remained unchanged. Therefore, a number of variables need to be incorporated while studying or teaching China's minorities – such as the complex dynamics of China's minority policy making, the ongoing debates on regional ethnic autonomy, current socio-economic and pol-economic rationale in Chinese policies towards its minorities and the dynamics of minority protests, the concentration of such protests only among some minorities, and so on.

While many of the complex issues remain, India and China, both large post-colonial nations, are religiously, culturally and ethnically diverse countries. One, an authoritarian state and the other, a democracy, both have faced major national questions right from their inceptions. There is much that can be studied about respective minority issues, and government policies and measures from a comparative framework.

To take a cue from research being undertaken in other parts of the world, there are books studying all minorities in China, and a few others focusing on the Yis and Zhuangs apart from the Tibetans and Uyghurs from an anthropological perspective, deconstructing Han homogeneity, politics and process of ethnic classification in thr PRC, the education system and language policy towards minorities, minority labour migration issues, pastoral issues in Inner Mongolia and Tibet, comparative studies of minorities in India and China, as well as, the US and China, issues of affirmative action and so on. Even with regards the study of Tibet, there is much diversity in approach.

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<sup>11</sup> This point is made by Benedict Anderson in his 'Foreword' to the book by Thomas S Mullaney. 2012. *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: xviii.

There is immense space for teaching courses on China's minorities in Indian universities given the surge in many interdisciplinary programmes across universities. Not just in international studies or area studies departments, but also in other social science disciplines such as history, sociology/anthropology, political science, economics, law, education and so on at Masters and M Phil levels. A few places where China's ethnic minorities are a taught course include the Australian National University. Further, there are quite a few universities that have established modern Tibetan Studies programmes, with many of them located in the US – at Columbia University, Indiana University, Case Western Reserve University, the University of Virginia and the George Washington University. In Canada, the University of British Columbia hosts the Canada Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia.

**About the Author: Tshering Chonzom Bhutia** is an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She holds a PhD in Chinese Studies from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. Her thesis was an attempt at generating knowledge on the dynamics of the Sino-Tibetan conflict in engendering a sustained impasse by using negotiation theory as an analytical tool. In 2007, she spent a month in Taiwan where she attended lectures on Taiwanese culture, society, economy and polity. Recently, she was awarded an ICSSR grant to undertake a comparative study of Indian and Chinese ethnic minority policies. She is also associated with the 'China-India-Nepal Trilateral Cooperation'.

She speaks and writes regularly on Sino-Tibetan issues. Some of her writings have appeared in the publications of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Indian Council of World Affairs and the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Among others, she has published in *China Report*, *Hindustan Times*, *World Focus*, *Tibetan Review* and Phayul.com.

She also has a rich work experience including research, editing and programme coordination. Her last stint as Programme Coordinator for the Heinrich Böll Foundation's programme on 'Democracy and Conflict' in India lasted for about four and a half years. Prior to that, she was Programme Coordinator, Assistant Editor and Assistant Fellow at the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies. Her first work assignment was with the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies as a Research Officer in charge of its China Desk. Simultaneously, she was the founding member and Editor of the magazine 'Tibetan World' for a period of more than a year.

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8/17, Sri Ram Road, Delhi-110054, INDIA.  
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