

**'Negotiating with the Sacred': Spirituality, Religion and Politics among Tibetan Buddhists and Hindus in Dharamsala and Pune, India.**

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This paper draws on findings from fieldwork conducted for the DFID funded 'Religions and Development' research programme. Ethnographic research in India among Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala and in Pune with devotees of a prominent transnational Hindu organisation, highlight different private and public intersections between religion, spirituality and politics. The case studies compare the way in which Buddhist spirituality has become integrated with the political call for a Free Tibet and the very different way in which a nationalist political agenda is hidden beneath declarations of 'secular religiosity' in the Hindu organisation. In both cases the public/private divide highlights the complexities of how adherents and or devotees negotiate personal spiritual practices with the wider transnational political goals of the movements they are part of. This paper will argue that the relationship between religious teachings, spiritual practice and politics is gendered. The gendered nature of the sacred and concepts of religious-political authority remain largely patriarchal despite significant visibility of women campaigning for equality both inside and outside of the traditions under study. This paper will consider how religious women reconcile this reality and continue to draw on resources from within their tradition to acquire a transnational political voice.

## **Introduction**

This article contrasts the Buddhist teachings of the Tibetan exiled community in Dharamsala, North India led by his Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Hindu beliefs underpinning the philosophy of Dada Vaswani the current Guru leading the Sadhu Vaswani Mission a transnational organisation based in Pune, Maharashtra. Buddhist spirituality has influenced the politically charged 'Free Tibet' campaign; similarly spiritual ideals are projected by Dada Vaswani alongside the pursuit of a politically orientated nationalist agenda. In both cases spirituality and politics are intertwined but are also inherently gendered and patriarchal. The public free Tibet campaign is shaped largely by a male religious and political leadership. For the women I spoke with active in the Free Tibet movement their emancipation also involves achieving equality within Buddhism. The absence of female Buddhist leadership was described by them as reflective of and partly responsible for a general lack of equality in gender relations outside of the monastic community. The Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) was established in 1959 in Tibet to protest against the Chinese invasion and now has centres across the globe including one in Dharamsala which opened in 1984. Informants in the TWA told me female religious leadership is crucial if wider equality for women inside and outside of Buddhist monastic structures is to be realised.

Similarly it is spirituality rather than religion that is emphasised as a central dimension to the work and message of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission. As I show, devotees of this organisation resist the label 'religious' or 'faith based' organisation and instead highlight the secular and deeply spiritual nature of their Guru's (Dada Vaswani) message. This 'secular spirituality' however masks a political agenda that seeks to promote Hindu values and beliefs as homogeneously Indian. In other words this organisation forms part of the right wing Hindu nationalist trans-national network. This political agenda and the worldview it promotes is gendered with the organisation heavily focusing on providing what it deems appropriate education for girls in order to ensure they raise and nurture the next generation of Hindu nationalists.

In both these contexts spirituality is promoted as the foundation for political action. Spirituality is founded on a concept of the sacred, an ultimate

source of knowledge and insight about the world. The political agendas of both Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala and members of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission are publically sanctioned by adherents because they build upon spiritual values that are rooted in a sense of the sacred. It is this relationship between the sacred, spiritual values and a political agenda that forms the analytical point of comparison between each context and from which the title comes. In each context political goals are articulated through spiritual values which in turn have a sacred source beyond question. The sacred gives political visions their authority and helps religious leaders and gurus shape gendered visions of how the world should be. Despite the similar relationship between the sacred, spiritual values and politics this article highlights the differences between each case studied. The ethical foundations of each case differ and also the spiritual purpose and political objectives. For Tibetan Buddhists compassion and a sense of non-duality, unity with others is the central goal of a spiritual life. For devotees of Sadhu Vaswani, spirituality is a personal journey in which the individual seeks to know and serve God. Acts of *seva* or 'service to others' and 'devotion to a Guru' are means through which personal spirituality grows.

The primary evidence presented in this paper comes from ethnographic data collected between November 2008 and October 2009 in both Dharamsala and Pune. Approximately one hundred interviews were conducted in each site which informs the arguments made in this paper. This material is combined with a review of local literature published by the various Tibetan organisations I visited and the Sadhu Vaswani Mission. Additional literature is used in order to explore the contexts under study and to help guide the critical analysis into how in each case study spirituality and politics inter-relate.

Three key concepts are at the heart of this paper and need defining. Firstly 'religion' is understood as a broad and complex category encompassing various dimensions. To unpack the diversity of religion and religious traditions is impossible and not particularly relevant to this paper. *Religion* prominently includes beliefs and values that shape people's worldviews and help shape how adherents understand their place in the world. Religion often includes, as in the cases under study here, an

institutional dimension that generates ideas about how adherents should live and that regulates the translation of belief into everyday practices. Religion also includes an experiential sphere where individuals focus on their personal journey through life which for many involves a relationship with God.

*Spirituality* denotes this personal internalised experiential sphere of religion which this article specifically focuses on. For the adherents I spoke to it was the most important and significant aspect of their tradition. The *sacred* describes concepts of or sources of divine insight and authority. For some such as the Sadhu Vaswani Mission 'sacred' refers to God presented as the ultimate reality and source of wisdom. The sacred in Tibetan Buddhism is understood also as wisdom and knowledge acquired through spiritual practice ending in the achievement of *nirvana* or enlightenment. In both cases teachings that claim to be inspired by the sacred carry authority and access to this knowledge is largely the preserve of men.

This paper is divided into three sections; firstly background to each context will be given. The second section will summarise the core religious and spiritual beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. The third section explores the political nature of the spiritual practices talked about in each case. The last section explores the role that education plays in promoting spiritual and political visions of the world whilst also ensuring the patriarchal status quo remains.

## **1. Background to the Tibetan Buddhist exile community and Sadhu Vaswani Mission**

### *Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala*

The largest Tibetan Buddhist community in India is based in Dharamsala which is situated in the Kangra Valley, amongst the Dhauladher Mountains of Himachal Pradesh, North India. Dharamsala divides into upper and lower levels, two kilometres from the lower part of Dharamsala is McLeod Ganj, home to the Dalai Lama and the majority of the exiled Tibetan community in North India (there are other large Tibetan settlements in South India too). The Tibetan government in exile has its buildings in the main town. This area is home to a large Tibetan community who began to settle here after 1959 when the Chinese first occupied Tibet. The Indian government gave the Tibetan

exiles this piece of land, which at that time was nothing more than forest. The community gradually carved out a town and re-established a community. The word 'Dharamsala' itself is appropriate since in Hindi it means "spiritual dwelling" or "sanctuary", and is commonly taken to refer to the resting place of spiritual pilgrims.

The vast majority of Tibetans living here are practising Buddhists. In the last Indian census of 2001 the population of this area stood at 19,034 (<http://www.censusindia.net/>). The core beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism and what distinguishes it from other forms of Buddhism will be reviewed in the next section. What is significant here is the highly politicised environment of Dharamsala sustained by the presence of fifty plus non-governmental organisations all of which campaign/ work on aspects of the Free Tibet campaign. Some organisations are welfare-orientated looking to help newly arrived Tibetans adjust to life in exile and overcome the physical impact of the journey from Tibet to India. Other organisations seek to promote the human rights atrocities suffered by Tibetans living under Chinese rule. Lastly organisations exist that seek to garner international support for a Free or autonomous Tibet. Differences of opinion exist among both the laity and monastic community as to whether Tibetans should be pursuing independence or seek to exist as an autonomous region within China. The Dalai Lama shifted to the later stance believing it to be a more realistic option that could be achieved without compromising Buddhist values (see section 3 for more details on this stance).

What is interesting about the way in which this political agenda is pursued is the incorporation of spirituality as the philosophical but also practical mechanism for achieving this vision. All my informants lay and monastic described the centrality of their spiritual lives as a source of motivation. They also receive from the Dalai Lama direction and guidance on political actions. As covered in more detail in the next section, the Dalai Lama combines the core Buddhist values of love, compassion and non-duality with a spiritual practice designed to enable the individual to realise them in everyday life. These values and the spirituality through which they are expressed connect to and support a political agenda seeking the emancipation of exiled Tibetans. This article goes on to explore how this

relationship between spirituality and politics is gendered. The views of members of The Tibetan Women's Movement (TWA) will be presented to help explore how religious women must often navigate aspects of their tradition that do not seem to support them.

### *The Sadhu Vaswani Mission*

The Sadhu Vaswani Mission is a prominent Hindu organisation with its headquarters in the city of Pune. It also has centres in both the UK (London), USA and South-East Asia. According to an interview with a senior employee it generates support from within the Hindu diaspora communities in these countries. The mission is founded on a lineage that began with Sadhu Vaswani who was the Uncle of the current leader 'Dada' Vaswani. Dada received his mantle as Sadhu Vaswani's successor after it was recognised by his uncle that he possessed divine qualities.

The mission complex is large and is situated on Sadhu Vaswani Road with a large statue of the founder positioned on a roundabout at one end. The main mission complex consists of a kindergarten, primary and secondary schools for around 1400 girls. It also contains huge meeting halls, and the residence of Dada Vaswani, the current leader, plus an administration block. The mission also have their own publishing house (Gita Publishing) located in the administration block. The educational activities of the mission spread beyond this central complex and include Mira's college and a nursing college. In total the mission claims to be educating around four thousand girls at any one time.

The organisation emerged in Sindh primarily, so the literature claims, as a religious-social welfare organisation focusing on educating girls. Sadhu Vaswani the founder was a teacher by profession but also claimed to be responding to concerns from the community that the education of girls was considered of secondary importance to that of boys. Sadhu Vaswani felt that investing in educating girls would result in a higher level of attainment in their children as women, in his view, are the primary nurturers and educators of the young. In other words, for Sadhu Vaswani 'nurturing', includes educating the young. However, this organisation was also shaped by history and specifically by partition. Hyderabad became part of Pakistan after the British implemented

the process of carving up the Indian sub-continent into religiously defined regions (Wolpert 2006, Singh 1990, Chatterji 2007). Historically Sind is the site of the Indus valley civilisation thought to represent the origins of Indian religion that then became known as Hinduism (Brockington 1981). As I show later in this article and perhaps helped by the mission's geographic heritage, experiences of partition live on in the sentiments and objectives of this organisation who still feel a unified culturally homogenous India is vital for future strength and prosperity of the nation. This can also be seen in the following quote taken from the mission's literature: 'Ancient is the history of Sind. The Indus Valley Civilization is at least 7000 years old. The Sindhis are a highly civilized and cultured people – enterprising, hardworking and industrious, full of the spirit of faith and courage.' (Vaswani 2007: 85) Although the mission do not describe themselves as Sindhi this regional identity is evident because in Pune the mission largely serves the Sindhi community many of whom moved to the city from Gujarat. Key employees such as the headmistress of the secondary school are Sindhi. The sponsorship programme run by the mission concentrates on serving the poor Sindhi community in Pune offering means tested scholarships to worthy cases.

The political mission of this organisation is hidden behind the spiritual teachings of its central Guru Dada Vaswani. It is the spiritual pursuit of unity and peace that Dada Vaswani publically talks about and which are presented by devotees as the core principles underpinning the work of the organisation. As I come on to analyse the spiritual journey that Dada believes his followers are pursuing is highly personalised. Individuals specifically women are also directed towards incorporating the goal of a unified Hindu India into their personal quest for spiritual fulfillment.

## **2. Core Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist Spiritual Beliefs.**

### *Tibetan Buddhism*

This article explores the relationship between spirituality and politics in two different contexts, one Buddhist and the other Hindu. Before entering any further into the analysis of how this relationship intersects in each case the core religious beliefs of these traditions need to be summarised.

Buddhism was brought to Tibet from India, and prior to Buddhism Bon belief was widespread. Bon stressed the importance of meditation and deep study, and the Dalai Lama claims that Buddhism helped to strengthen these dimensions (The Dalai Lama 2008). Although Tibetan Buddhism developed distinctly from Indian Buddhism it retained the exact basis of the teachings of Lord Buddha. Buddhism was introduced gradually to Tibet by numerous scholars and divides into various schools: Nyingma, Kagyud, Sakya and Geluk. Each school draws on the teachings of the Hinayana (Theravada), and Mahayana schools, including Tantrayana traditions. They are not clearly separated, but nevertheless the informants I met tended to describe contemporary Tibetan Buddhism as Mahayana. The Dalai Lama is officially known as 'His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama' named Tenzin Gyatso. He is both the head of state and the spiritual leader of Tibet. Details of the Dalai Lama's biography can be found on his website ([www.dalailama.com](http://www.dalailama.com)). The Dalai Lama writes:

"For moral guidance, they conform to the Vinaya rules which are principally followed by Hinayanists, while for more esoteric practices, of every degree of profundity, they use the methods of the Mahayana and Tantrayana schools." (nd: 6)

Tibetan Buddhism is part of the Mahayana tradition in which people aim to attain the highest stage of *Nirvana* Buddhahood for the sake not only of the individual but of all other sentient beings. *Nirvana* is the blissful release from the endless cycle of rebirth achieved once the individual becomes enlightened. Tibetan Buddhist society is divided into the *sangha* or monastic community and the laity. For Tibetan Buddhists compassion for others is the central focus, and is absolutely integral to personal spiritual development. In my interviews with both monks and laity in Dharamsala the prevailing view stressed that helping others is purely selfless and although the individual will benefit spiritually this should not be a motivating factor. For followers of Dada Vaswani and as I detail shortly, the motivations behind acts of charity is slightly different in that they are seen as a means to support individuals in their personal spiritual journey. According to informants Tibetan Buddhists do not act to help others because they see it as important for or even an

expression of their spirituality. Instead, they act for others innately through the emotion of compassion which removes any sense of divisions between people. The expression of compassion is the purpose of Tibetan spiritual practices and the individual must learn to resist and overcome urges to be selfish and the tendency to think of one-self before others. One informant also a minister in the Tibetan exiled government described Buddhist spirituality as “all living things treated as the mother of oneself”. The motivation to act in either practical or spiritual ways should come from an awareness of how it will benefit others. According to the minister, “Tibetan Buddhists must learn to think of others only, and this is considered to be the essence of the Bodhisattva’s way of life.” The term Bodhisattva is given to someone motivated by great compassion who wishes to achieve Buddhahood or enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.

#### *The Hindu beliefs of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission*

Three key concepts *karma*, *samsara* and *moksha* are identified by scholars as the core Hindu beliefs (Knott 1998, Flood 1996, 2003). Life is considered to be an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*). Humans must try and live according to the karmic law and pursue their *dharma* or duty in order to acquire merit that will see them reborn into a ‘better’ life in the next. *Moksha* is the end goal which involves the unity between the individual soul *atman* and the world soul *Brahman*. *Moksha* represents the end to the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) and releases the *atman* from the toil of rebirth. What constitutes a ‘better’ life is rooted in the caste system, a hierarchy that ranks people’s status and role in life according to how close they are perceived to be to achieving *moksha*. High caste men, who live ascetic lives completely devoted to God, are thought to be more likely to achieve *moksha* than a person of lower caste. Gender also plays a part in privileging men as the most likely to achieve the spiritual goal of *moksha*. Women in contrast find their religious lives tied to their domestic role leaving little time for ascetic practices. The term *varna* is one closely associated with caste. *Varna* relates to a person’s occupation and ranks them according to levels of ‘purity’. Certain occupations are considered impure, e.g. street cleaners and leather workers (for a more detailed comparison see Killingley 1991). Hinduism as founded on a unifying

central concept of God or *Brahman*. As the world soul *Brahman* is considered too complex and all encompassing to worship directly, many different gods and goddess have evolved and developed over time all of which represent aspects of *Brahman*.

Hinduism has a strong tradition of Gurus, Swami's and Sadhu's who are spiritual teachers and leaders. It is through the teachings and devotion to a specific religious figure that most Hindus learn about their religion. Mlecko (1982) describes how gurus in India work as religious teachers are simultaneously the focus for worship. Gurus as religious teachers have, according to Mlecko, played an important role in the transmission and development of the Hindu religious tradition. Hindu worship involves *darsan* which is the process by which the devotee looks at the deity but also occurs when a devotee looks at a guru (Fuller 1992). The deity is in the image looking back at the devotee who lies within their field of power and experiences it (see also Eck 1981, 1998).

### *Secularity and spirituality*

A distinct difference between my Tibetan Buddhist informants and devotees of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission I spent time with came through in how they distinguished between religion and spirituality. For devotees of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission no separate meanings were given to religion and spirituality. Spirituality denotes a personal journey that requires the individual to fulfill their *dharma* in order to grow. The fulfillment of *dharma* in part requires them to show compassion towards and serve others less fortunate. Opportunities for devotees to fulfill *dharma* are provided daily by Dada Vaswani through *seva* sessions in which groups of the city's poor are invited into the ashram complex to receive food. The act of serving the poor is a chance for personal reflection but also an opportunity to display compassion for others.

The organisation insists that it is secular. 'Secular' takes a distinct Indian meaning here referring to commitment to all faiths (Dreze and Sen 1995, Khilnani 1999, Cohen 2001). The most senior figure I interviewed in this organisation, one of the executives, was clear that Sadhu Vaswani Mission was a secular organisation because it "serves all faiths". Even when probed he would not admit to the organisation being pre-dominantly Hindu. He said

“this is inaccurate because we worship and celebrate all faiths”. He also claimed that the mission was active in interfaith dialogues and collaboration. This senior informant would not couch the organisation’s core principles in religious language but said “We use the word ‘love’ to describe our actions in serving the poor.” In response to a question about where God fitted in he said “God is love you do not need a separate word”. The image this organisation markets publicly is secular yet spiritually orientated. Dada in his literature stresses the importance of serving the poor, challenging human suffering and working to achieve world peace (Sadhu Vaswani Mission 2009, Vaswani 2002, Vaswani, 2007).

In interviews with local people outside of this organisation in Pune most endorsed its image of ‘secular spirituality’. Sadhu Vaswani’s *samadhi* (place where ashes are buried) at the heart of the ashram complex depicts him with one of his forefingers raised, indicating that we are all one. This image of Sadhu Vaswani is how he is most commonly depicted and was described by informants as promoting the mission’s interfaith agenda (Vaswani 2007). However, in my review of the organisation’s literature and after hearing Dada Vaswani speak I felt the raised forefinger and stress on interfaith serves to highlight how similar religions are and specifically how inclusive Hinduism is as a faith that can embrace all others. This underlying message operates to elevate Hinduism as the one all-encompassing tradition that all Indians should adhere to.

In both contexts a concept of secularity is stressed. Sadhu Vaswani devotees are adamant that the organisation is secular because it serves all faiths. This is a perception of the organisation supported by people outside its membership who also described it not as religious but secular. However, devotees and people outside of the organisation all described the mission as being spiritually driven. In the case of Tibetan Buddhists working for organisations that form part of the Free Tibet campaign a separation is made between their political activities and personal spiritual practices. A connection was still talked about since without their spirituality many claimed, they would lack the motivation and direction to pursue their political goals.

### *Spirituality as a source of political strength*

A typical example of this distinction between the political and spiritual came during one interview with staff of an organisation named LAH, which focuses on the education of Tibetan refugees. I was told that the organisation was utterly secular, with no connection to religion whatsoever. It was also stated clearly that religious ideas formed no part of staff members' motivations to work there. The two men with whom I spoke then proceeded to give me a description of their own histories, recounting their night-time journeys through the treacherous Himalayan mountains to reach the Indian border. They went on to tell me of their arrival in Dharamsala, and the great joy with which they had met the Dalai Lama there<sup>1</sup>: "every Tibetan's dearest wish fulfilled." Hearing this heartfelt account, I enquired further about the importance of the Dalai Lama and his teachings to the work that they do for LHA. "In your mind, are they absolutely separate and distinct?" I asked. The response I received was interesting, for it seemed to contradict their earlier statements about religion: "our faith in His Holiness is everything...everything we do is connected with our faith." After this, when I asked the same questions, this time replacing 'religion' with either 'faith' or 'spirituality,' I received many similar answers everyone I spoke to acknowledged that spirituality plays a fundamental role in the work that they do for Tibetan independence and for the welfare of the exiled Tibetan community. In short, spirituality both motivates and steers the work of many in this community.

When I asked informants to explain these apparent discrepancies, I was told that religion and spirituality in Tibetan Buddhism are markedly different. Religion encapsulates dogma and ritual whilst the latter involves personal connections with the divine, or with the desirable state of 'nothingness' which is beyond the trappings of human life. Thus one man stated: "religion is our practice both expressed through rituals and in our texts. Spirituality is deeper and internal...in the sense that we each must develop

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<sup>1</sup> The Dalai Lama aims to meet personally with every Tibetan refugee on his/her first arrival into Dharamsala.

our own inner consciousness. It is from our spirituality that a sense of morality and compassion comes from, and these are the values that then guide our work.” What came out of this conversation was that it is not religious teachings *per se* that inform the political activity of many Tibetan Buddhists, but rather their personal connection with a collective consciousness that links all beings and which is experienced through spiritual practices.

This distinction between religion and spirituality was made by all of my informants. Notably, members of the women’s association that I interviewed felt that the separation between spirituality and religion helped them to deal with gender inequalities rife in Tibetan Buddhist traditions. They asserted that much of religion enables patriarchy to flourish through male dominated leadership structures and institutions. This inequality then transplants itself into wider society, making it hard for women to pursue a non-domestic life. However for these women spirituality represents the essence of life, and the religion/spirituality distinction allows them to separate problematic gender ideology from their personal sense of worth and connection with what one woman termed “the greater force”. Buddhist ritual practices represent the expression of spirituality and for the women I spoke with, are disconnected from the patriarchal structures of their tradition. Representatives from the Tibetan Women’s Association told me they felt the Dalai Lama advocated gender equality and did not see him as personally obstructing women’s empowerment (more details later). The spiritual life of Tibetan Buddhists was also described by many as important because of its healing effects. Despite the immense traumas suffered by many in this community, including separation from family, gruelling journeys from Tibet to Nepal and then into India, torture and other forms of violence, many insisted that Buddhist spirituality enabled individuals to reconcile themselves with these experiences and look to the future. Buddhist spirituality for exiled Tibetans clearly offers both the space to heal and the motivation to pursue political goals.

### **3. Political Spirituality**

The extent to which Buddhists have integrated their personal spirituality with a wider political agenda directed at achieving emancipation from Chinese rule is described by some as an example of ‘engaged Buddhism’ (see Tomalin

2009). In practical terms Tibetan Buddhism has shaped the language of the Free Tibet campaign, determined the actions (non-violence) taken and provided motivation and healing to those affected. In this sense Tibetan Buddhism can be said to have become 'engaged' in this contemporary issue of concern to its adherents.

In addition to notions of engagement, non-duality is another central dimension shaping a distinctly Tibetan spiritual politics. Non-duality and its impact on Tibetan politics was neatly described to me by a researcher working for the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy<sup>2</sup> who talked extensively about the importance of spiritual non-duality for the fate of Tibet. In 1979, the Dalai Lama announced that he would no longer pursue the goal of an independent Tibetan nation. He stated that he would be happy to coexist with the Chinese so long as Tibet was granted status as an autonomous region of China. This he calls the 'middle way' approach, seeking relative autonomy rather than full independence. This approach springs from the concept of non-duality, in which all sentient beings are equal and the same, to be loved and treated compassionately as one's own mother/brother. Thus to insist on separation from the Chinese would in effect be declaring an inherent division between the people of the two nations, for all intents and purposes contradicting the core Tibetan Buddhist principles. Thus the Dalai Lama has, in the opinion of this researcher, said that he will "allow the Chinese to take advantage of Tibet, as long as there can be some level of dignity and equality which at the moment is non-existent".

My time spent with women of the TWA revealed how their political agenda reflected the role they felt women must play in the Free Tibet movement. My informants talked about their determination to promote human rights and how they saw it as the role of women not just to contribute towards the political campaign for a Free Tibet but also to educate the next generation about their cultural heritage. One informant stated that "we are mothers so we naturally understand the importance of nurturing and preserving our heritage for our children". My informants also talked frankly about the centrality of religion in their lives and in the lives of those women they seek to help.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a research organisation, not connected to the government-in-exile.

Women newly arrived from Tibet come to the organisation once they have registered and receive counselling. The employees try and get them to open up about their experiences of living under Chinese rule and the traumas of their journey into exile. One employee admitted feeling unqualified for this counselling role because it is not in Tibetan culture to share openly with others your feelings “you do not share your soul”. She went on to describe how for a Tibetan Buddhist emotional existence is very internal hence the importance of spirituality. She was specific that spirituality rather than religion offered space for the individual to confront and acknowledge experiences of the past. Spirituality was clearly seen as very practical providing strength and offering comfort.

She then recounted how for the work of the organisation it was not enough for women to resolve or acknowledge their experiences internally but that they must share openly and publicly so that things can be changed. For women active in this movement their political agenda includes challenging the male domination of their religious institutions. The TWA run empowerment workshops with groups of lay women and also nuns to highlight the extent to which women are excluded for the highest decision making levels of their tradition. In the workshops women are urged to think about how this exclusion impacts on their self-esteem but also on their own development and sense of well-being. Achieving the equality of women inside the Tibetan religious institutions is seen as crucial if equality is to be seen in wider society. The TWA write in one publication: “Buddhism is the basis of our cultural and social identity. As a community we believe it is very important to encourage institutions to encourage women to devote themselves to spiritual practice.” (2006: 4) This statement reinforces again the close integration between a political vision of gender equality and spiritual practice as a means to achieve it.

#### *Nationalism, spirituality and service in the Sadhu Vaswani Mission*

As already stated in the first section of this article, the Sadhu Vaswani Mission, perhaps deliberately, promotes its social welfare activities and highlights its work empowering girls through education. It does not openly claim to be pursuing a politically orientated goal of uniting India through a

singular culture and religion. Close study and with time I was able to draw out an underlying agenda which reflected a more nationalistic and conservative ideology than the organisation first presents. A study of its literature reveals more clearly the organisation's nationalist sentiments projected through its insistence on preserving a singular Indian culture and religion (see examples given in the first section). As I document below Dada Vaswani in audiences talks about the need to emancipate India from the clutches of British colonialism. In a similar way to the TWA preserving and passing on cultural heritage is seen by the Sadhu Vaswani Mission as the responsibility of women. The mission concentrates on educating women as the bearers and nurturers of Indian culture and religion and stresses the need to heal India by strengthening its spiritual foundations. These themes; advocating a singular Indian culture and religion, stress on women as the bearers of culture and religion and anti British sentiments are recognised by scholars of Hindu nationalism as common themes running through the discourses of many organisations (Chiriyankandanth 1996, Jaffrelot and Blom Hansen 2004). However alongside this nationalist discourse Dada Vaswani also urges his devotees to remain dedicated to their spiritual journey. *Seva* is described by Sadhu Vaswani as an important expression of compassion which helps the devotee realise their spirituality.

*Seva* is the Hindu word meaning 'to give'. Many Hindu organisations refer to their welfare activities as acts of *Seva*. According to Jacobsen (2003) the concept of *seva* has its origins among worshippers of Vishnu (which can be dated back to the Vedas) and basically means serving Vishnu by helping in his temples and worship of God from a place of intense love. This love can be expressed through songs and rituals but also through serving others to alleviate their suffering (for more details see Misra 1989).

Despite the spiritual purpose behind *seva* a closer look at the concept reveals that the practice of 'giving' requires someone to 'give to'; a power relationship is implicit in this act. However the word means 'service' not 'gift'. 'Charity given from a guru to people who are not necessarily devotees can also be said to create a social obligation from the receivers of charity towards the guru.' (Jones 2006:52) Jones (2006) describes a process by which the guru combines Indian understandings of family relations and love on the one

hand and practices of gifts and hierarchy on the other to establish the foundations of authority. This authority enables the Guru to suggest that the receivers of their gifts should show gratitude by becoming devotees. This allegiance may not increase the organisation's finances but could help to build political support if, in the case of Dada Vaswani Mission, the organisation is simultaneously pursuing a political agenda. The Sadhu Vaswani Mission does not centre its *seva* operations around a concept of economic and social transformation with poverty alleviation as an end goal. The absence of this long-term vision meant that *seva* maintained a relationship of dependence in which the poor must continuously come and receive rather than look to a future of self sufficiency. This rests in contrast to the central spiritual concepts of Tibetan Buddhism which stresses non-duality as the ideal human relationship in which no hierarchy between people exists. However, according to the TWA, the patriarchal leadership structures in Tibetan Buddhist make the realisation of non-duality problematic.

#### **4. Education, gender and political objectives**

This article has argued that the ways in which both Tibetan Buddhists and devotees of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission relate spiritual practices and their distinct political objectives is gendered. The analysis of this relationship has shown the potentially different experiences men and women have of their spiritual tradition which in the case of the TWA has led to a different political vision emerging. The patriarchal leadership structures of both traditions promote men as the more likely bearers of sacred knowledge. This access to sacred knowledge sanctions male control over the decisions making processes governing their tradition or organisation. Patriarchal gendered ideals about appropriate paths for women and men operate to maintain the status quo, for example, institutional leadership structures and the specific roles men and women should take pursue. Education in both cases is promoted as an essential means through which the spiritual and political visions can be achieved and preserved for generations to come.

The implicit assumption that knowledge of the sacred is the preserve of men has meant that Tibetan Buddhist nuns have struggled to access religious instruction and to find acceptance as fully ordained members of the *Sangha*

(monastic community). The female Buddhist laity in exile has accessed education because the Dalai Lama sees it as essential in order to increase the capacity of men and women to promote the political vision of an autonomous Tibet. However, as yet this greater access to education for women has not led to an opening up of leadership space for Tibetan nuns or formal acknowledgment that they should have the right to full ordination.

Education in exile is markedly different from education in Tibet (Manjupuria 1990; TWA 2005). Traditionally, Tibetan education has taken place within religious institutions, which naturally reinforce the gender ideologies inherent within the religious system of Tibetan Buddhism (Klunklin & Greenwood 2005; Peach 2005; Owen 1998; Tomalin 2009). In Tibetan Buddhism however, like in Theravada, women have traditionally been prevented from being fully ordained. In recent years Tibetan nuns have been campaigning for this right, supported to some extent by the Dalai Lama, who has commissioned research on the issue through investigation of religious scriptures held in Dharamsala's Tibetan Library. However it is clear that by preventing women's full ordination the religious system has long asserted that monks are superior to nuns, that they are more capable of living the highly respected life of a religious renunciate. (Manjupuria 1990; TWA 2005).

For Sadhu Vaswani women are highly visible but for a specific reason, because they are seen as fulfilling a vital role in the organisations pursuit of a nationalist vision of India. The Sadhu Vaswani Mission places greater emphasis on the behaviour of women which contrasts against a stress on masculinity seen in the operation of the RSS (Blom Hansen 1996, Anand 2007). Masculinity as a gendered construct was absent in my conversations with devotees and employees of this organisation. Although the highly visible and central figure of a male leader suggests a strong patriarchal concept of male dominance and authority the literature concentrates on the importance of women's role and responsibility in unifying India (see also Sen 2007). The focus on girls is driven by a desire to embed a sense of appropriate female behaviour into the mindset of young girls. The mission hopes that by the time they graduate from the Mira system these students will comply with its underlying patriarchal gendered ideology. This, for example can be seen in the quote from Dada Vaswani; 'Now woman gets her chance. She is called

upon to build a New World. She is a symbol of *shakti* in the Hindu scriptures. And *shakti* is not a force. *Shakti* is integration. This includes intelligence. Education, more education, is needed. But it must be education of the right character'. (2007: 84) The mission believes that the stability of the Indian nation depends upon women's willingness to embrace motherhood hence the statement made by one senior devotee, which also appears in the mission's literature; "educate women and you educate the whole country" which is a core Sadhu Vaswani Mission teaching ([www.sadhuvaswanimission.org](http://www.sadhuvaswanimission.org)). Passages throughout the locally published literature reinforce this overtly patriarchal conception of gender relations conflating womanhood with motherhood (Vaswani 2002, 2007). Although claims are made on the official website and by the members I interviewed that the Sadhu Vaswani Mission is dedicated towards empowering women, the concept of empowerment being pursued is different from western secular definitions. Western concepts of empowerment equate the term with equal/same opportunities for boys and girls, the mission highlights that women's role that education must prepare them for, differs from that of men.

Further evidence of the conservative and nationalist ideology of this organisation comes from insights gathered during an annual questions and answers session for students (20<sup>th</sup> November 2008) with Dada Vaswani at the Mira girl's college in Pune. The observations I made clearly brought home the extent to which the girls are being taught to absorb and pursue a specific and gendered role that prescribes their place in the world as mothers and home makers. The country is still "emasculated by the British". "It is your duty to complete India's emancipation". "We are not yet truly free". In seeking to achieve this vision of a united and free India Dada Vaswani focuses exclusively on girls and women.

## **Conclusion**

This article compared the relationship between concepts of spirituality and political objectives specifically analysing how spirituality feeds into and supports political visions of the world. The comparison between the views of Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala and devotees of Sadhu Vaswani Mission in

Pune reveals interesting differences between how each case has drawn on spiritual values to forward a political set of objectives. This article also stressed that a gendered perspective is fundamental to the analysis of each context because both religion and politics are gendered differentiating between the lives of men and women and what they can achieve in both their spiritual and political lives. This article found that spirituality was conceptualised differently by each group of informants.

Tibetan Buddhists see spirituality as the pursuit and realisation of compassion towards others through non-duality aiming to respond to the needs of others in order to support them in their reconstruction of a new life in exile in Dharamsala. Buddhist spirituality is therefore about highlighting the interconnection between people and the responsibilities that each person has to ensure the wellbeing of others. For the Sadhu Vaswani Mission spirituality is a central pre-occupation and is described in terms of a highly personalised journey in which the individual pursues closeness with God. This individual relationship with God is strengthened by living out core values that are thought to be represented through the divine namely compassion and love for all. Seva or service is the primary mechanism through which this compassion towards others can be displayed. However as analysed in this article seva activities revolve around wealthier devotees serving poorer ones and therefore reinforces the social divide between them highlighting the visible poverty of some contrasted against the excess riches of others.

Both the Dalia Lama and Dada Vaswani as religious leaders of each group of people talk about how essential spirituality is for the achievement of political objectives. In the case of Tibetan Buddhists in Dharamsala this is emancipation from the Chinese and the freedom to return to their homeland. For Dada Vaswani a nationalist vision of a united Hindu India represents a political vision towards which his mission's activities are directly.

Applying a gender lens to each context reveals contradictions and makes visible other experiences and agendas. Informants for the Tibetan Women's Association highlight the contradiction between Buddhist values of non-duality and the treatment or exclusion of women from within the institutional structures of the tradition. Dada Vaswani clearly combines his nationalist vision with a patriarchal one focusing energy on educating in a

specific way the next generation of Hindu mothers. According to Dada Vaswani and a sentiment shared by the TWA, it is the responsibility of mothers to raise children to accept the centrality of Hindu values and the importance of preserving a singular Indian culture.

Compassion and Love are values talked about by informants in both contexts but translated differently into practical everyday activities. Compassion and love for Sadhu Vaswani devotees begins with love towards their central Guru that then under his direction extends outwards towards the selected poor of Pune. For Tibetan Buddhists this compassion and love guides and shapes a passive campaign for freedom.

The spiritual values of both the Sadhu Vaswani Mission and Tibetan Buddhists rest in concepts of the sacred. The political visions in each case retained their dominance and momentum because of the way they are woven into the everyday and personal spirituality of devotees and adherents. This does not mean that the visions are uncontested and as the Tibetan Women's organisation highlight many who feel their options limited by their tradition challenge the male dominance of sacred knowledge negotiating their own space and platform from which other political visions emerge.

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