

***Intercultural Workshop on Conflict Transformation: exploring non-violence with members of Indian and Tibetan communities in north and south India.***

by Richard Higginson M.B. B.Ch

MA. Correspondence Student in Peace Studies & Conflict Transformation  
Center for Justice & Peacebuilding  
Eastern Mennonite University  
VA, USA

Email: [our\\_lovestory@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:our_lovestory@hotmail.co.uk)  
Tlf: +45 38889338

## **Contents:**

Abstract:	3
Introduction:	4
A Brief Sketch of Indo-Tibetan Relations:	5
A Local Example of Conflict:	5
Purpose:	6
Participants:	7
How the participants were able to participate?	8
What did the participants themselves think about the workshop?	9
> Most important aspects?	9
> Most challenging aspects?	10
> Changed perceptions of the other?	11
> Relevance to religion?	12
> Room for Improvement?	12
A Neutral Observant Perspective:	13
> Relationship-building focus	13
> Examples of Indo-Tibetan Conflict	14
> Why was there not a stronger Indian representation?	15
> Suitability of Teaching Form	15
> Future Developments?	15
Conclusion:	16
Related Links:	18

**Abstract:**

**Background:** The increasing number of exiled-Tibetans arriving in India since 1959 has inevitably created yet another intercommunal interface in a land that is probably just as reknowned for its regional and communal hostility as it is for its cooperation. In many ways, Tibetans and Indians seem to coexist harmoniously, but issues of inequality, discrimination, and differences in socio-economic development continuously gnaw away at an initially accepting human spirit, so that tensions build.

**Project:** To bring together representatives of the Tibetan and Indian community in Dharamsala, Himachel Pradesh, N.India, to explore Indo-Tibetan relations in the context of a 5-day residential workshop on the skills and practice of Conflict Transformation.

**Results/Conclusion:** There was a strong emphasis on relationship-building, which is the foundational to the process of conflict transformation. This compensated somewhat for an uequal representation of Indians and Tibetan participants. There was evidence among the participants by the end of the workshop, of a changed perspective of the 'other' for the better, which suggests that the worshop was successful in initiating or inspiring the transformative process, which underlies sustainable peaceful coexistence.

**Keywords:**

intercultural; Indian; Tibetan; conflict; relationship-building; transformation; non-violence

*The converted hotel dining room is dark and empty. A banner is hung up at one end to cover the kitchen behind. It reads, 'Intercultural Workshop on Conflict Transformation hosted by TCCR, (The Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution)<sup>1</sup> and WISCOMP, (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace)<sup>2</sup> a branch of Foundation for Universal Responsibility of H.H The Dalai Lama<sup>3</sup>.'*

*A makeshift altar stands below with a framed picture of His Holiness propped up against the wall behind two butter lamps. A Speaker's table, prepared for the partnering representatives of TCCR and WISCOMP, including the Guest of Honour - an MP from the Tibetan Exiled-Government stands ready. It is five minutes to the scheduled inaugural opening ceremony, and a pile of colourful unclaimed nametags lie on a table at the back of the room. Most of them are for 'Media' and 'Participants'. The participants have been arriving since eight-thirty this morning, mainly representatives from local NGOs, but also the local Hotel & Restaurant Association, and Newcomers from Tibet; but a considerable number have not shown up.*

>            **Introduction**

Since China's invasion of Tibet in 1950, which led to H.H The 14th Dalai Lama seeking refuge in Dharamsala, India, in 1959; thousands of Tibetans have followed suit, even to the present day, thanks to the leniency of the Indian government. Tibetan students in India today may be 3rd-generation exiles from Tibet. Suffice it to say, there are thousands of Tibetans that have lived their entire lives in India, and must coexist with a people who look, speak, and live differently. The same, of course, can be said for Indians. If ever there was a melting pot of culture, religion, language, and class, then India is a prime example. Indeed, despite its unprecedented accomodating nature, India is also no stranger to communal and regional tensions and conflicts, and it is in such a field of potential hostility, that the communal tensions existing between Tibetans and Indians can so easily ignite. It is in this context that a space for Indians and Tibetans has been created, in the hope of building a united front committed to preventing violence within and between their respective communities. This article seeks to describe the beginning of such an initiative, including its purpose, participant profile, and how they were able to discuss the issues concerning them so openly and honestly. The article then proceeds to report back on their experience throughout the five-day workshop, including, (amongst other things) quotations regarding how perceptions have changed during the workshop, perceived relevance to their religion, and suggestions for how the workshop could be improved in the future. Before the concluding remarks, a neutral observer's perspective has also been included as part of the article's discourse to supplement the critical analysis of such a courageous initiative.

> **A brief sketch of Indo-Tibetan Relational tensions**

One could argue that Tibetans are more disadvantaged than Indians, existing in a land they cannot call their own, and without even the security of 'refugee status', let alone equal rights of citizenship. Although it was very brave and hospitable of India to open their borders to the Tibetans fleeing from Tibet, their growing contact with China is cause for Tibetan concern, reminding them that exile on Indian soil is not something to be taken for granted. But this naturally creates an awkward tension and fear of falling out of favour with their Indian hosts. They must endure the hassle of renewing their Registration Cards annually, while visa and passport applications are rarely feasible. They must often compete with age-old Indian regional and communal favouritism when seeking work, as employment opportunities within the Tibetan settlements are much more limited. Indians, on the other hand, might find it hard to accept that they must share their land and their customers with Tibetans. Furthermore, they may be embittered by the ever-increasing international support that follows the Tibetan spiritual and political leader that inevitably leads to increased social support in the form of NGOs and sponsorship programs that seem to benefit the Tibetan community exclusively. It is here, in the daily struggle for survival and the desperate effort to climb above the poverty line that one might sympathise with Indian envy and discontent towards relative Tibetan prosperity.

> **A local example of a Conflict**

The following recent, true story from Dharamsala is an example of how communal tensions, existing just beneath the surface, can erupt into communal violence.

*A Tibetan man rented a room from an Indian landlord, but was given clear instructions not to use the landlord's toilet. The Tibetan became irritated by this, and decided that he would use the landlord's brother's toilet instead, since he lived nearby. When the landlord's brother found out about this, he and his friends allegedly beat up the Tibetan tenant, who retaliated by stabbing the landlord's brother. News of this inflamed much anger among the local Indians, so much so, that during the following days, any Tibetan that walked down the street at a certain place was attacked by a gang of Indians and beaten severely with sticks. Many Tibetans were taken to hospital for their injuries and the police were called in to quell the violence and regain order. The Tibetans responded by boycotting the Indian taxi service, and Indian shops. A curfew was decreed, forbidding people to roam the streets at night, and local NGO workers from both sides of the community entered a facilitated dialogue with the local authorities to try and come to a resolution.*

> **Purpose**

It is in response to the communal tensions that exist, and the prevention of future eruptions of violence, like that described above, that TCCR, in partnership with WISCOMP, has outlined the following goals:

1. To equip the participants with skills to maintain good relations with their immediate circle – teachers, friends, and family members etc.
2. To contribute towards making a difference in the methods and approaches of handling conflicts in their daily lives.
3. To enable the participants to become more effective communicators and active listeners.
4. To empower the participants and build their confidence in taking up responsibilities in their respective communities.
5. For the participants to be able to contribute towards a better and more effective management of conflicts within their circles.
6. To strengthen their beliefs in the merits of democratic processes.
7. To be able to contribute towards forming a support community that can help each other in the times of crisis on both sides.

.....

*It is at least a quarter past eleven before the inauguration ceremony gets under way, waiting in vain for late-arrivals, or curious news-reporters to fill the mass of empty chairs. It is a humble and uncertain beginning, yet a beginning, none the less, that sees the kindling of an Indo-Tibetan partnership through the wisdom of Conflict Transformation, symbolised by the lighting of the butter lamps.*

*There are only half the expected number of participants present at the inauguration; eleven in all: six females, (all of whom are Tibetan) and five males, (two Tibetan and three Indians.) One wonders why on earth so many people have turned down an all-expenses paid, five-day residential workshop at a hotel in Bagsu Nag, just outside McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala?*

The late arrival of two Indian women, representing an NGO in Lower Dharamsala was a great encouragement to say the least. Although initially alarmed to discover they could only commit to one day, their decision to stay for the duration would turn out to be one of the workshops great success stories, adding much needed balance to the mix of participants. Over the next two days, the workshop would loose two Indian males to work commitments, yet gain three Tibetan males. On the final day, fourteen participants, (eleven Tibetans and three Indians) successfully completed the training program.

## > **Participants**

English was chosen as the common language of engagement during the sessions. This immediately introduced a bias in terms of participant selection, but as the workshop got underway, it became clear that it also became a limiting factor in relation to the level of understanding and engagement, as the participants varied quite significantly in their degree of fluency. On the first day, the following participants were present:

Two young Indian men from Navjavradi Youth Club, (NYC): a branch of Community Action International<sup>4</sup>, (CAI) who, among other things inspire Indian youth to clean up the neighbourhood by collecting and disposing of the local garbage. Their inspirational motto, '*You can't expect to get anything from the state if you don't first give something to the state.*' seems to be enough to encourage local youth involvement. There was also an Indian man from Bharat Tibet Sahayog Manch, (BTSM) an organisation that helps raise awareness of the situation in Tibet amongst Indians, and encourages the preservation of Tibetan culture and language. One Tibetan woman from the Tibetan Youth Congress<sup>5</sup>, (TYC) a political activist group for exiled-Tibetans campaigning for complete independence. Two Tibetans from Students for Free Tibet<sup>6</sup>, (SFT) a political activist network for all 'Free Tibet'-supporters around the world. Two Indian women from Jagori, (meaning, 'Oh woman, awake!') a rural expansion program that seeks to defend woman's rights. One Tibetan man from Long Sho, a Jewish-inspired holiday camp that teaches leadership skills and promotes moral values to Tibetan teenagers. One Tibetan woman from Active Non-Violence Education Centre, (ANEC) a Tibetan organisation that seeks to equip the community in the planning and execution of non-violent acts. One Tibetan woman working for The National Democratic Party of Tibet<sup>7</sup>, (NDPT), and one Tibetan newcomer, who has been in India for less than two years.

The participants were between 19-30 years old. 60% had previous experience in Conflict Transformation of one form or another. The context for previous intercultural contact had been school/university, social work, or friends. 30% of the participants indicated that they had no previous contact with the other. 100% believed Conflict Transformation is relevant, and their hopes for the workshop ranged from personal development to learning how to solve the conflicts between their respective communities.

Before the workshop began, the Tibetans perception of Indians was mixed. On the positive front, some remarked of their gratefulness towards Indians for allowing Tibetans to coexist with them. Others mentioned how they felt a closer connection to Indians than to those of other nationalities. Others simply referred to Indians as 'friends', or to the philosophical belief of 'interdependence'. Some, however, remarked that Indians were disrespectful of them because of their 'refugee' status, or because of their different race, that they were often dishonest, over-charging etc. One participant even felt hatred towards Indians, but knew that it wasn't right to feel like that. The person hoped, that the workshop would give him some tools to work with regarding this. The Indians perception of Tibetans was generally positive, remarking that Tibetans were '*religious people who believe in peace*'. The potential for cooperation was also mentioned.

> ***How were the participants able to participate?***

Despite various obstacles encountered during the workshop such as drop-outs, language-difficulties, and last-minute program changes, the participants did not hold back from sharing on a personal level, already on the second day, of how they had experienced conflicts. Once one participant felt safe enough to participate in this way, others generally followed suit, creating a deeper, more intimate forum for discussion. TCCR's workshop-aims clearly state their wish to this end. To (a) create a friendly and secure environment, (b) encourage mutual respect and understanding, (c) provide an enjoyable learning experience, and (d) enable sharing of deep feelings by both sides.

*But how were these aims fulfilled throughout the workshop?*

As mentioned earlier, the workshop was an all expenses paid, five-day residential, in the comfort of a hotel in Bagsu Nag, just 2km from McLeod Ganj. The workshop was therefore organised in a way that sought to ensure the participants comfort, but also their interaction, both in and out of the session. Each participant was allocated a 'secret friend' during the workshop, with the aim of encouraging positive and creative interaction. Each participant was asked to give a gift to their secret friend on the final day, when all the secret friends were uncovered. Most of the participants were able to overnight at the hotel and therefore shared a room with another participant. All meals were taken together and the daily schedule allowed three hours of free-time before the evening meal. The evening sessions were planned to be lighter, more interactive and fun, seeking to draw each participant out of a neutral shyness and reveal their true colours! Taking a common focus, for example, 'our land', 'our culture', and 'our values', the participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their own response to certain questions, challenges, or statements, while being presented with the response of others.

The facilitation of all sessions by the trainers or volunteers, sought to ensure a safe and stimulating environment for active participation. The use of games, role-play, small group discussion and presentation were implemented during the sessions to help serve this end. The language obstacle was augmented somewhat by efforts to give examples, or introduce key words or themes in Hindi and Tibetan during the teaching sessions. Small-group discussion was also allowed to forego in Hindi instead of English as the participants themselves wished. Facilitator feedback meetings following the completion of each day's session helped to retain a common perspective among facilitators and fine tune the conditions for optimal engagement by the participants. The compilation of a corporate 'agreement' (also known as 'ground rules') for the duration of the five-day workshop, created by the participants themselves also encouraged participation. The agreement sought to safeguard the smooth running of the daily program, and help prevent irritation or offence.

It was worryingly clear from the first day, that the failure of a number of Indian participants to appear, meant that they were heavily outnumbered by Tibetans. Faced with the disappointment of haemorrhaging two Indian males after the first two days because of work commitments, meant that

Indian participants took on an immediate 'gold-like' quality. The decision of the two Indian girls to stay, therefore, after gentle persuasion and encouragement from the trainers, helped to compensate for a strong Tibetan representation. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the presence of three Indian participants redressed the balance of cultural representation at the workshop, their active participation was invaluable in helping the workshop maintain a realistic purpose. For example, it was the courage and assertiveness of the two Indian girls taking advantage of the opportunity, (at short notice) to share about their organisation's work, (following the cancellation of their director) that helped bleed the Indian colours and patterns into the proverbial workshop tapestry.

It was also the surprise explosion of a dancing supreme, found in the only Indian male representative that helped to anchor his presence in the web of intercultural experience. One might argue, on one hand, that the organisers were lucky to get away with three expressive Indians that were able to compensate in some measure for an otherwise disappointing and inadequate Indian representation. On the other hand, however, it could be said that it was the organisational and empowering skill of the trainers, and perhaps the encouragement of the Tibetan participants that drew out the potential in these participants.

> ***What did the participants themselves think about the workshop?***

***Most important aspects:***

- 12 out of 14 of the participants filled out a final feedback form after the final day's session. When asked what the most important aspects of the workshop had been, 4 participants chose the session on '*Non-Violent Communication*', (NVC) stating that this was very relevant for everyday use by all people. One participant also stated that NVC was a helpful reminder of Buddhist teaching. NVC is a simple, structured method of communicating, devised by Dr. Marshal Rosenberg, from his book, '*Non-Violent Communication: a Language of Life.*' where one is first encouraged to articulate one's observation of the given situation in a way that is untainted by interpretation. This is followed by a *description* of one's associated feelings, as opposed to an *expression* of them. This then supports the presentation of one's underlying need, and therefore one's request for change. For example, '*Whenever the music is played so loud and at this time of night, I become irritated and angry because I cannot sleep. It is important for me to get a good night's sleep because I have to get up early in the morning to go to work. I would therefore request that you turn the music down, or preferably, that you turn the music off altogether so that I and others can sleep?*'
- 3 of the participants chose '*Theatre of the Oppressed*', ranking it as the second most important aspect of the workshop. Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of social activism, (*derived from the thoughts of the Brazilian 'Freedom from Poverty' activist, Paulo Freire*) that grew out of the social situation in the Brazilian *favelas*, where one was not given liberty to speak out about the oppression of millions of Brazilians living in extreme poverty. It seeks to expose the reality of local social injustice through drama. This can take four main forms: (a) Image Theatre: where a team of activists make a frozen image reflecting a scene of local oppression for 5-10 seconds in a public place before dispersing into the crowd. (b) Newspaper Theatre: where one picks a topical issue

from a newspaper while sitting in a public setting next to other actors and members of the public. While the actors create a hot debate over the issue, the purpose is not only to raise awareness of issues of injustice, but also to provoke the participation of the on-lookers. (c) Invisible Theatre: where activists start a conflict in a public place, which typifies a common issue of oppression. Again the purpose is not only to raise awareness, but also to provoke the on-lookers from passivity to proactivity. (d) Forum Theatre: a more overt staging of oppression or conflict, where the scene is frozen, (often at quite an intense stage of the conflict) and the spectators asked to suggest potential solutions through their own participation in the drama.

- Other important aspects mentioned by the students included the 'practical application' of the teachings, supported by familiar examples that aided understanding. Environmental issues affecting the livelihoods of both Tibetans and Indians were also regarded as important. Some of the participants, very insightfully pointed out that our responsibility to the environment includes, not only people, but all living beings. That in our endeavour to practice non-violence towards our fellow human, we must also practice non-violence towards the earth itself. Such issues, demanding the attention of both Tibetans and Indians, particularly the contesting over and exploitation of Tibet's rivers, which already is affecting the livelihoods of Indian and Tibetan communities, has the potential to create a united Indo-Tibetan endeavour to revive an eco-consciousness from their respective communities.

### **Most challenging aspects:**

When asked what they felt were the most challenging aspects of the workshop,

- 2 of the participants reported the sessions on *Peace-Building & Conflict Transformation*, explaining that although it was very interesting material, there was too much to take in in one go. One of the participants suggested that although this presentation would be sent to her email inbox, following the workshop, she would have liked more handouts under the sessions to aid reflection, concentration, and future reference. Another participant commented that the examples given to help illustrate the models of Peace-Building & Conflict Transformation were lost on some because they were pitched at a global level, instead of on a local level. Despite such criticism however, there were just as many participants who listed these sessions under the most important aspects of the workshop. There were many models and definitions introduced under these sessions, but perhaps one of the focal points was Lisa Schirch's model of Peace-building Approaches, (from her book, *'The Little Book of Strategic Peace-Building' 2005*). In this model, peace-building is subdivided into four main categories: (a) Waging Conflict Non-Violently e.g. boycotts and strikes. (b) Reducing Direct Violence e.g. the judicial system, peace zones, curfews and ceasefire agreements. (c) Transforming Relations e.g. trauma healing, restorative justice (e.g. offender-victim facilitated dialogue), and conflict transformation (d) Capacity Building e.g. Training, education and research.

Referring back to the recent example of conflict in Dharamsala mentioned earlier, it is possible to see how the different peace-building approaches from the model were implemented. (a) The Tibetan boycott of Indian taxi service and shops. (b) The increased police presence, curfew and facilitated peace-talks. (c) This approach to peace-building did not feature, and perhaps therefore underlines why

such an intercultural workshop on conflict transformation is needed. (d) The work of local NGOs like TCCR.

- 2 of participants reported that communicating in English was the most challenging aspect of the workshop, affecting their level of understanding and participation;
- and finally, 2 participants perceived the implementation of Conflict Transformation in their lives and others, as the most challenging aspect. As one participant insightfully wrote, *'going beyond solving a problem to transforming one's behaviour and outlook on life seems like yet another spiritual journey.'*

Other most challenging aspects reported were:

- Group interaction and relationship building
- The constant awareness of Chinese occupation in Tibet
- Preventing conflict escalation.

### ***Changed Perceptions of the Other?***

Although the term, '*Conflict Transformation*' was not expanded under the sessions beyond its definition of being a more *permanent establishment of peace that comes from a changed consciousness*, the participants were asked if they felt their perception of members of the other side of the community had changed throughout the workshop. A sample of their comments are listed below:

*'At the beginning, I felt that the Indians weren't interested in our NGOs, but after interacting with them, I found out that they were interested in our work. I also discovered that they are also doing so much to improve their community.'*

*'I think we have a better knowledge about the community we live in and a better understanding of how to interact as humans. Our inter-connectness is clear to me.'*

*'The workshop enabled me to see Tibetans and Indians from the lens of human being. To recognise the conflict at the 'issue' level and try to enhance relationships at the 'human' level.'*

*'We did not feel lonely in this workshop due to the behaviour of the Tibetans. It was looking like family.'*

*'Before, we were unaware of Tibetans work in Conflict Transformation; but through this workshop we came to know Tibetans personally, and talked with them face to face. We learned of how they are working for youth, the community and environmental issues etc...'*

*'I was born in India, but I am Tibetan. I feel very thankful to India. The workshop reminded me of how we can live happily.'*

### **Relevance to Religion?**

Religion has been described as a two-edged sword when it comes to intercultural relations and peace-building, with the capacity to both enlighten and empower humanity to pursue the ideal of peaceful coexistence, but also as a means of justifying violence and war against our fellow human. Although a discussion of religion's role in conflict transformation was not included in this workshop, the participants were asked to comment on whether they felt their religion or moral values had any relevance to conflict transformation. The feedback from the participants appeared mixed, suggesting that its inclusion in future intercultural workshops would be very illuminating and informative. On a surface level, however, it is interesting to note that 3 of the participants, either did not feel that their religion, (or their moral values) had any relevance to conflict transformation, or they did not wish to comment on the subject. As stated above, the underlying reasons for such a statement demand further discussion.

The following comments seemed to regard religion as relevant to conflict transformation or vice versa, although they might also be viewed as quite 'universal', which might not be surprising in light of a strong Buddhist-inspired representation. It may also reflect a pluralistic acceptance of all religions, typical of post-modernism:

*'Conflict Transformation is a human development process that helps us become better human beings and strive to create a peaceful, diverse world.'*

*'Tolerance, trying to be a better human being, interdependence, not to harm others.'*

*'There is a great conflict existing between the different classes of Hindus and the different restrictions imposed on them... The workshop would be quite helpful in that context.'*

*'It has lots to do with world peace'*

*'It has brought relevance to my religion, because as a Buddhist, we always think of conflict as negative, but it's not. It can be positive also.'*

*'I think it has a lot to do with all religion and most of all, it has a great deal to do with basic human values - something we always tend to forget whenever emotions take us over.'*

### **Room for Improvement?**

There were many varied suggestions of how the workshop could be improved.

- 3 of the participants, directly or indirectly mentioned that there was a need for a stronger Indian representation.
- 4 of the participants expressed the need for more local involvement, be it people, NGOs, or the need to address local issues.
- 3 of the participants commented on the teaching methods, suggesting that presentations should be less formal, and supplemented with more visuals, hand-outs, and local examples.

The remaining comments cannot easily be grouped, and are listed below:

- A better gender balance
- More '*Theatre of the Oppressed*'
- How conflict transformation relates to the universal religious ideals of world peace
- Involve people from other regions
- Involve the older generation
- Maybe not in a hotel
- Traditional food from both communities
- Better time management

> **A Neutral Observant's Perspective:**

The nature of a pilot project, by definition, communicates something 'experimental', with the expectation that there can be lots of room for improvement. The participants insights are obviously invaluable to this end, but it is perhaps useful to consider a neutral observant's perspective also.

**Focus: Relationship-Building**

In a Conflict Transformation workshop between local Tibetan and Indian representatives, one might expect that the issues of conflict in that area take priority. On the contrary, however, this project clearly prioritised *relationship-building* in it's planning and execution. There are many good reasons for taking such a focus, and three of these are highlighted below. Firstly, in relating to conflicts, the facilitators taught the importance of separating the 'issue' from the 'relation', while addressing both with equal importance. If, for example, one focuses only on the issue, to the neglect of the relation, any resolution is likely to be short-lived. If, on the other hand, one gives priority to the relation, to the neglect of the issue, the relationship will struggle to take root and develop healthily. In this way, the facilitators created an environment that optimised the opportunity for relationship-building, while there was a natural focus on intercultural conflict during the sessions.

The second reason for focussing on relationship-building is taken from the context of one of the latest examples of communal violence, described earlier. As this example was briefly analysed using Lisa Schirch's model of Peace-building Approaches, the facilitators reported that little or no work was done in the area of 'Transforming Relations', neither during, nor following the establishment of a peace settlement. From the feedback given by the participants on the final day, there is evidence of changed perceptions on both sides of the community, which is an integral part of the transformative process inherent in Conflict Transformation, and therefore suggests that the participants have begun to engage in this process.

Thirdly, the promotion of relation before issue might propagate the emergence of an alternative identity paradigm. I.e. To see oneself, not just as Tibetan or Indian, (thereby carrying around their respective stereotypical lenses, which might over-emphasize the existence of conflict) but rather create space to discover new common identities, or be reminded of old ones! It is the acknowledgement of

multiple (self)-identities and the re-humanising of the 'other' that is part and parcel of Conflict Transformation.

### ***Examples of Indo-Tibetan Conflict***

During the sessions, some of the participants took the opportunity to share examples of conflict situations from their own experience. Very few of these stories, however, related to conflicts between Indians and Tibetans. Perhaps such experience lay deeper under a conscious 'lock & key' demanding more purposed facilitation to draw such issues to the surface? Addressing and discussing communal stereotypes and local issues of conflict would perhaps have contributed to this end, but unfortunately both these sessions were omitted on the last day because of time shortage. The scarcity of such examples of conflict might also be explained by the fact that it may be less of an issue for the participants themselves, who may have a greater understanding of 'inter-connectedness', for example. One of the few examples of inter-cultural conflict that was shared during the sessions, however, revealed a great deal about how a conflict's escalation and eruption feeds off seeds of suspicion, fear, and misunderstanding of the 'other'

*Tenzin is one of the exiled new-comers to Dharamsala, and has only been here 6 months. When he arrived, he spoke Chinese and a little Tibetan. He had no knowledge of Hindi, or English. He has now improved in Tibetan, and has picked up a few words of Hindi. Democracy is a foreign concept to him, as he has struggled all his life under Chinese Communist rule. He has been told to be on his guard against Indian salesman and taxi-drivers who are renowned for charging higher 'tourist' rates to everyone who doesn't appear Indian. One day he takes an auto-rickshaw to Norbulinka Institute. He has been informed beforehand that it should not cost more than 20Rs. When he arrived at Norbulinka Institute, the taxi-driver says '20Rs', but Tenzin thinks he has said 40Rs, and immediately becomes defensive and refuses to pay the amount. The Indian taxi-driver is both surprised and angry that his Tibetan passenger is refusing to pay up and starts to argue with him. Meanwhile, Tenzin becomes even more aggressive, as he is used to having to fight for his right under Communist rule in Tibet....*

It is also important to emphasize the fact that the Indian community were heavily under-represented throughout the workshop. It is therefore likely that the group dynamics and nature of discussion would have been different if there had been equal representation of both sides of the community. Perhaps group interaction and relationship-building would have been more challenging? Perhaps session discussion would have been more focussed on local examples of inter-communal conflicts? Perhaps the nature of the discussion itself would have been more contested? Such speculation can therefore only highlight the importance of equal representation, in any endeavour to create a forum for intercultural dialogue and in the facilitation of the transformative process, if one is to ensure a more realistic outcome.

### ***Why was there not a stronger Indian representation?***

It was difficult to point to any particular causative factor in the unrepresentation of Indians, and one must therefore consider a number of possible explanations, which are listed below:

#### *(a) Lack of Trust*

Perhaps TCCR had been unable to build adequate trust among some of the local Indian NGOs in preparation for this venture. Such an initiative might therefore have been perceived with suspicion, hesitation, or lack of importance.

#### *(b) Technical Communications Failure*

It is not uncommon for telephone and internet lines to cut out for periodically in Dharamsala. This might well explain delays in registration, or in receiving invitations.

#### *(c) Poor Communication*

It is also possible that invitations were simply not replied to due to an administrative oversight, or that for whatever reason, the NGOs did not understand that the workshop was a 5-day residential. There is also a possibility that information was lost in whatever language was used to communicate.

### ***Suitability of Teaching Form:***

The Indo-Tibetan facilitation partnership is certainly an essential component to building a framework of equal representation. However, it is important to consider whether the styles and forms of teaching and facilitation are conducive to the participants present. There are many influencing factors in this consideration, including choice of language, level of education, age-group etc. Throughout this workshop, it became clear that Hindi might perhaps have been a more inclusive choice of language than English. Local application of theory aided by the use of localised examples, role-play and small-group discussion appeared to be the essential components of effective learning.

### ***Future Developments?***

During one of the final sessions, the participants were encouraged to think about what happens next, following such an experience. There was clearly a general sentiment of cooperation and continued contact among the participants, but any concrete ideas were not developed further than the distribution of a common contact list. It remains to be seen how such sentiment will solidify in the future. For example, the request for TCCR to do workshops in some of the NGOs represented seemed to be left hanging. One is therefore uncertain of where the facilitators expectation of participant responsibility and capability lies. It was not clear whether TCCR wanted to promote the replication of 'learning' by the participants themselves in their respective NGOs, or whether they were accepting of a more passive standpoint, i.e. 'Come and do it for us' which would invariably increase the burden of an already busy annual schedule for TCCR. Many of the participants were moved by the very informative presentation on the destruction of natural resources in Tibet, which will affect the livelihoods of Tibetans and Indians increasingly into the future. As has already been mentioned, perhaps a united Indo-Tibetan endeavour to revive an eco-consciousness from their respective communities is an example of how the achievement of the workshop can be developed further?

## **Conclusion:**

The increasing number of exiled-Tibetans arriving in India since 1959 has inevitably created yet another intercommunal interface in a land that is probably just as renowned for its regional and communal hostility as it is for its cooperation. In many ways, Tibetans and Indians seem to coexist harmoniously, but issues of inequality, discrimination, and differences in socio-economic development continuously gnaw away at an initially accepting human spirit, so that tensions build. The recent outbreak of communal violence in Dharamsala illustrates the point and TCCR's initiative to host an inaugural intercultural workshop on Conflict Transformation, in partnership with WISCOMP from Delhi, seemed like a much needed endeavour.

An equal number of representatives from local NGOs on both sides of the community were invited to attend an all expenses paid, five-day residential workshop in a hotel, 2km from McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala. As a consequence of 'no-shows' and drop-outs, however, the resulting participant profile was heavily skewed towards the Tibetans. A selected sample of Indian and Tibetan NGO workers is by no means representative of Dharamsala as a whole, and although this was not TCCR's aim from the outset, the consequent under-representation of Indian participants unfortunately limited the outcome of the workshop being viewed as a realistic model of conflict transformation even more.

One might expect the agenda of such a workshop would be to 'cut to the chase' and focus on the local issues of inter-communal conflict. TCCR's strategy, however, was to optimise instead, the conditions for *relationship-building*, which at first might seem like a step away from the issues, rather than a step towards them. The reasons for such an approach are multi-factorial, but include, (a) the importance of separating the relation from the issue, while addressing both, (b) the need to create a forum that would stimulate the transformation of relations, especially in the light of the recent outbreak of communal violence in Dharamsala. (c) To create an environment favourable to the emergence of multiple identities as an alternative to more polarised perceptions. TCCR achieved this aim, not only through the residential format of the workshop - including shared meal times, shared rooms and free-time, but also through the planning of lighter, more fun-based evening sessions. Sensitivity and flexibility to language, and particular attention to the outnumbered Indian participants were also key contributing factors. The shared examples of intercultural conflict were few, which might reflect the strength of relationship building, but is more likely to be a reflection of an unbalanced participant representation and a lack of opportunity for discussing communal stereotypes and issues of conflict in the local area.

In the participant feedback on the final day, *Non-Violent Communication* and *Theatre of the Oppressed* were regarded as the most important aspects of the workshop, while *Peace-Building & Conflict Transformation*, and the use of *English Language* were regarded as the most challenging aspects. There was clear evidence of changed perceptions on both sides towards the other, which suggests that the

transformative process had at least begun. There were no sessions addressing the role of religion in conflict directly, but when the participants were asked how relevant they thought it was to Conflict Transformation, the responses were quite mixed, either taking a 'no comment' stance, or a more universal stance. The comments suggest that a discussion on this dimension of conflict would be most enlightening in the process of transformation. Perhaps it will be a more prominent feature of future intercultural workshops?

Finally, the participants suggestions for improvement centred around three main issues:

- (1) Equal Representation of Indians and Tibetans.
- (2) More localised involvement and application in teaching.
- (3) Teaching form. i.e. less formal, more visuals, hand-outs, etc.

The closing remark is from one of the participants in their final feedback

*'This workshop has provided us with a platform where we can interact with people from other cultures, a platform to reflect on our inner thoughts, and given us new information previously not known to many of us. For example, the destruction of nature in Tibet, and communicating through theatre.'*

***Related Links:***

1. [www.tccr.org](http://www.tccr.org)
2. [www.wiscomp.org](http://www.wiscomp.org)
3. [www.furhhd1.org](http://www.furhhd1.org)
4. [www.communityactioninternational.org](http://www.communityactioninternational.org)
5. [www.tibetanyouthcongress.org](http://www.tibetanyouthcongress.org)
6. [www.studentsforafreetibet.org](http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org)
7. [www.ndpt.net](http://www.ndpt.net)