Social Adaptation of the Tibetan Refugees in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas

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THE Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 led to large scale exodus of the Tibetan nationals who were subsequently settled in various parts of India and other countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Switzerland, and in smaller numbers in Canada, United States, and other European countries including Japan. According to the figures available for the year 1976,[1] there were 82,546 of them living outside their homeland, often in dejected conditions despite best efforts of the various governments, voluntary organizations, and the people themselves. As many as 8,854 were settled in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas alone, trying hard to make a living out of any vocation left unto them.

This paper seeks to discuss the social adaptation of the refugees settled in these Himalayas. The discussion on their economic adaptation, which is closely related with social adaptation and which precedes the latter, has been deliberately dropped here in view of the size of this paper. However, economic adaptation is often reflected in social adaptation which however is a slower and more complicated process.

This study is based on a sample of 80 households drawn from Kunphelling Settlement at Ravangla (South Sikkim), Gangtok, and Kalimpong. The fieldwork was conducted in 1987 using observation and interview as basic tools of data collection. The interview was based on schedules though extra-schedule questions were often asked to cooperative informants. The secondary materials used here were collected mainly from the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala in August 1986.

Social Adaptation

It is desirable here to devote a few words to the concept of 'social system' and the way it has been operationalized here. 'Social system' basically refers to the interaction between individuals, groups, or institutions within a given environment. According to the Marxian theory, the basic units of it are socio-economic classes which interact for economic and political power. It is in this sense that the Tibetan social system has been understood and analysed by a number of Tibetologists like Melvyn Goldstein[2] and Eva Dargyay.[3]

The more abstract concept of social system is propounded by Talcott Parsons who defines it as:

> a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the 'optimization of

> gratification' and whose relations to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols.[4]

The major structural units of a social system are accordingly 'collectivities' and 'roles' and the major patterns of relationships linking these units are values and norms.

No empirical work is known to have been done using Parsons' theoretical framework for reasons which are both ideological and practical. But the Marxian concept of social system, though an easier option for empirical work, does not seem appropriate under refugee situations. The refugees, by definition, are detached from their traditional modes of production. Therefore, the Marxian model is perhaps best suited to the study of adaptation in Tibet itself, as the works of Goldstein and Dargyay have proved it. In a refugee situation, the Parsonian concept of social system is more meaningful though heavily criticized by scholars like Ralph Dahrendorf and Stanislav Andreski for having ignored, among others, the 'conflict' aspect of the social system. However, the total demolition of the traditional classes in a refugee situation and its impact on the social system needs a careful attention.

A. Collectivities

The traditional Tibetan society constitutes the following main collectivities: family or clan and classes like nobility and serfs. The patrilineal clan members believed themselves to have descended from a common ancestor and did not marry within themselves. Within each clan, there were mainly two sets of generation. The first set consisted of the father, and father's brother (both elder and younger ones). The second set had the son, his brothers, half brothers and cousins. Thus marriage between first cousins was considered as incestuous. This exogamous clan was called *Pha-spun* (or *spad-spun*) and was known to have strong collective character. This was indicated by the same kin terms used for all persons of the generation such as *pha-khu* or father, father's elder brother, father's younger brother, etc.[5]

In modern Tibet, that is, the Tibet from the seventeenth century onwards, three forms of marriage are known: monogamy which was more common in Amdo region, polygyny which was confined to the rich or the nobles, and polyandry which was practiced by the cultivators and herdsmen. The first form of marriage is considered to be relatively recent. The second is considered to be a political means of binding the important clans and groups into matrimonial alliance. It is also explained as a religious need - for the *cakra* or 'circle' of participants in the rites devoted to Heruka. The third form is commonly known as 'fraternal polyandry' in which the eldest brother alone chose the wife and other brothers became her husbands automatically.

Fraternal polyandry forms a strong collectivity of the brothers bound together by the system of property relations and dwelling place. The law of inheritance being primogeniture, the younger brothers had no claim over the property of the family if he opted to have his own wife and live separately. The property of the family was thus indivisible and inalienable.[6] Such a system

could sustain probably because one of two of the brothers used to be always away from home for bartering, trade or herding and the youngest brother was more often than not a monk.

In a refugee situation, there is almost total dissociation from their traditional economy. Even if the occupations are the same as before there are conceptual differences in the same. Therefore, 'collectivities' based if they were entirely on economy would break and new 'collectivities' based on the new economy would evolve. But while there is little association between their pre-flight and post-flight economic life, there is still a strong continuity between the earlier and present 'collectivities'.

This continuity can perhaps be explained by the fact that while their traditional economy got disintegrated religion came to their rescue and saved them from the possible catastrophe of economic disintegration. It is in this light that change and continuity in the various structural components of their social system may be discussed.

It is seen that despite the refugee situation the patrilineal clan is still very strong in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas. The solidarity between the members of a clan has become stronger as it has fewer members here than it used to be in Tibet. The sense of clan allegiance is so strong that in many places where there are no clan members of one's own, families from one's native village are often treated as one's own clan members.

About marriage too, no drastic change has taken place. While monogamy has been the most dominant form polygamy has not disappeared completely. The predominance of monogamy is also largely due to the fact that most of the refugees settled here are commoners who were monogamous even in Tibet. It should also be pointed out that though polygamy has continued the reasons demanding it are different. For instance, fraternal polyandry was conditioned in Tibet by their property relations and their socio-economic necessity which compelled some brothers to leave home for many days. But here such a marriage is often compelled by their economic disability to have a wife for each of the brothers and to build a house for each of their male members. The other reason could be their reluctance to marry non-Tibetans or the reluctance of the local women to marry with these 'vagabond' Tibetans.

In terms of authority and power also, the eldest brother or the first wife enjoys the highest position as it was so in Tibet. But few of them own private landed property here and even when they have it their dependence on it is negligible. The traditional enmity between paternal uncles and nephews is also known to have continued wherever there is fraternal polyandry. These conclusions, however, apply mainly to those refugees who had crossed the border in early 50s and those who could come with enough riches.

B. Roles

'Collectivities' by definition deal with extra-individual entities but 'roles' are necessarily related to individuals. 'Roles' are defined as 'expected behaviour associated with a social position'.[7] Some social psychologists have distinguished between 'actual behaviour' and 'role behaviour'. Thus the

'actual role' may not be identical with 'expected role'. However, we are concerned here mainly with the changes in the 'expected role' or 'role' drawn from one's position.

The role of the family head in traditional Tibetan society varied according to the form of family. In fraternal polyandry it was actually the eldest of the brothers who used to act as the head and not the father. Even in monogamous families, the father, if disabled, would be replaced by the mother and if deceased the wife would take over as the head.[8]

The role of the family head, irrespective of its form, was limited to representing the family's interests against the outsiders. In this regard, certain interests of the family such as cultural ties used to be shared by other members of the family as well. Within the family, the head's role was even limited because almost every member has a say in the family matters. The head's role varied according to his education and other attributes but by and large it was insignificant except in noble families.

The women, specially the mother and the wife of the eldest brother, had a very high position in the Tibetan society. Tibetans are very compassionate and treat all sentient beings as their own mother. The women are also considered as the symbol of ultimate wisdom in Vajrayana.[9] The Tibetan society being deeply immersed in religion it is quite natural that it treats the women, barring the unmarried, so highly.

The children upto the age of four could not be held responsible for anything but after that age they were considered old enough to assist in the family chores or choose their vocation. The youths, specially if they are intelligent or educated, would be given important responsibilities and respected even by the elderly people. The reaching of youth, which took place in the thirteenth year, was of particular importance among the tax-payers for every youth was fully taxable.[10]

The role of the old people was rather limited: they devoted most of their time to religion, counting the beads of their rosaries or spinning the prayer wheels. They had few family responsibilities (like looking after the children) and their opinions were often paid little head to. And old age did not necessarily make them prestigious though they were always respected.

The situation is not much different among the Tibetan refugees in the region concerned. There are many households where the wives act as the head of the family. They sit besides their husbands, assisting them in replying to my queries and often controlling them from making certain remarks. The husbands on their part often consult their wives. And whenever there is a married son as the main bread-winner of the family, he comes forward while the parents sit quietly in a corner. When such a son is away, the parents often asked me to wait till he came back.

The formal head of the family has a limited role even in the post-flight situation. The new situation demanding a wide diversification of occupations has further weakened the role of the family head. Apparently his role is greater in the Settlement than in the urban areas of Gangtok, Kalimpong and Darjeeling because the dependence of the children on him is more in the Settlement. The Tibetan women still have a high status. But this status seems

to have drawn more from their workability than religion. A woman, specially the mother, is not only the caretaker of the house and children but often an active earning member. She not only looks for everybody but also weaves, spins and works on the roadside. Her vitality and had-working nature is well appreciated by the non-Tibetan neighbourers.

The educational boom among them here has delayed the age at which the youths assume responsibilities. Those who go for schooling do not normally start working before reaching 18 or 19. Once they enter into the working life their social responsibilities also increase. In fact, the refugee youths work not only for themselves or their families but also their society as a whole.

Not much difference is seen between the roles of the old people in Tibet and here. Though the only section of their society to have first-hand experience of the Chinese invasion and the horror of flight across the snow-bound borders, they seem to be little detached from the youths.

C. Norms and Values

'Norms' and 'values' are very closely related concepts. Sociologically, 'values' mean 'objects of socially conditioned desire' which are 'unevenly distributed and differentially ranked'. They are part of the social structure and they help in conditioning social behaviour. 'Norms' are also common standards or ideas which guide the individual's actions and enhance group unity. Both norms and values are moreover specific groups. Values may at best be considered as higher-order norms. However, for the purpose of this paper, the word 'norms' has been used to avoid the redundancy of writing both the words together.

Religion is perhaps the most important norm in the Tibetan society. The monks and nuns held a position of very high repute in Tibet. This was perhaps because religion was not only a body of supernatural beliefs and practices but also a body of science, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and art.

It is also known to all that the whole Tibetan society revolved round the monastery. A good proportion of their manpower was always involved in monastic affairs whether they took religion as a profession or not. The entire economic and social life were in a way connected with religion.[11]

Another important norm of the traditional Tibetan society was their dislike for anything foreign. They indulged in self-explorations and never sought to visit places outside except when profession demanded it. Such introvert tendency is believed to have been prompted by their philosophy of the world as insufficient and unreal.[12]

The third norm that has a lot of significance in their society is abstention from killing, stealing and telling lies. For instance, in the area studied by Dargay, hunting and fishing were prohibited and no warriors' dances or bow and arrow contest took place. A thief was called *rKu ma*, which is an abusive term. A thief running away with his booty would not be chased after a certain distance as they believed that the act itself would punish him.

Now, the belief in *Karma* as a norm may be discussed. This belief says that a good act now is rewarded in future or in the next birth and if a ill act is committed the next life will be painful. Thus, it has both positive and

negative aspects. Positively, it instills in them the faith to shape one's future and negatively, it constrains on the individual to commit any ill act lest the next life become tortuous.

This norm may be greatly responsible for the industrious habits of the Tibetan refugees. They have to earn not only for their daily survival, the schooling of their children or sibs but also for offerings to the monastery or alms for the beggars for ensuring a better life in the next birth. Such offerings or alms include the burning of lamps with butter, flour cakes or *gTor ma*, money and grains. This takes place in almost every major and minor festivals when they gather at their local monasteries.

Finally, it may be shown that gift-giving is also an important norm of the Tibetan society. It was mainly the monastic and feudal class members who indulged in elaborate gift-giving.[13] This was, however, standardized and formalized even for the commoners.

Some of the norms discussed above have remained in tact but all norms seem to have sustained their effectiveness in the region. Religion is by and large the most important norm even today. Better still, they have the Dalai Lama here as religion personified. He is not only the symbol of unity and integrity but also a source of spiritual and temporal strength. Without such a living god, the social control function of Buddhism would perhaps be less effective in a refugee situation.

The aversion for anything foreign is one of the norms that has weakened considerably. Their main profession, which is business, demands that they travel extensively and interact with people outside. They have to learn the local language and often wear the dress the local people do.

About dress too, it is mainly the old people who generally wear their traditional dress: the youths and the children usually do not. In fact, they wear foreign clothes much more than the members of other communities. The aversion for foreign clothes is particularly expressed in Kalimpong on their Uprising Day (10th of March) when they dump their Chinese clothes at a public place and set them on fire. What may be noted here, however, is that they alone do it: no other host community has ever done it.

In fact, the aversion for anything foreign as a norm does not seem very true of even the traditional Tibet. For instance, Francis Younghusband writes:

> The house will contain also examples of Chinese porcelain and jade often of great beauty, and, unluckily, in these days gavish European ware, such as lamps and vases. Piles of valuable clothing will also be found in the better-class houses - rich and exquisite Chinese silks ad satins, Chinese shoes, thick blankets and quilts, fur coats, and so on.[14]

Abstention from killing and stealing is generally practiced even today. Though a proclaimed non-vegetarian society, they generally do not kill any animal and stealing is unheard of. But 'telling lies' is a norm which is perhaps difficult to expect of specially those whose profession is business.

Whatever the norms, the children and the youths are found less adherent than the old people. They find more meaning in formal education, modernization and things like that. The Tibetan students today want to become doctors, engineers, lawyers and the like. There is a mounting craze for 'service' occupation among them and even the old people are today found encouraging their children towards this profession.

Conclusion: Whither Tibetan refugees?

The Tibetan refugees of the region and India as a whole are passing through a critical period of transition in their history. The international status of Tibet as a Chinese province has been accepted by almost every country of the world including India. The voice of the Tibetans in Tibet is not usually heard across the tall glaciers on its southern border but reverberates much loudly in Beijing inviting the Chinese army to throttle their voice as it happened in early the year (1988). India which has the largest share of the Tibetan refugees is busy championing the Non-Aligned Movement and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. She has been helping the Tibetan refugees in every way except politically though the Tibetan refugees have always looked forward to India's help even on this front.

The Tibetan refugees all over the world have been successfully coordinated through the Government-in-exile in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh. Time and again it has appealed to various countries for various helps but most have responded only in terms of financial aids which are of course badly required as it has almost no finance-generating mechanism of its own. It cannot be over-demanding because without the aids received form the various countries, it is difficult to sustain itself.

The government-in-exile seems to have been able to coordinate its members more successfully in economic rather than the socio-cultural front. The socio-cultural ambivalence of the Tibetan refugees is expressed in the pull between two opposite forces-centripetal and centrifugal. This Government is trying its best to pull all its people together and hold them within the Tibetan 'mainstream' but the people themselves, particularly the youths and the children, are trying to move away from it. But politically, the youths are very much in the 'mainstream'.

An important reason for their cultural centrifugality is perhaps the Hindu pluralism itself. The Hindus accept the Buddhists just as their own part and never as followers of a different religion. So the Tibetan refugees do not get the opportunity to feel that their religion is different. The Hindu pluralism is noted even in terms of food habits, dress, language, customs, etc. Besides, the region in question has many Buddhist group like the Lepchas, Bhutias, Tamangs, and the Sherpas, who visit monasteries and respect the Buddhist monks as the Tibetans do. Since there seems no formidable watershed between the Hindus and Buddhists, the members of either religion do not realize that they have often crossed the boundary if that exists at all.

The question - whether they will return to Tibet - is much discussed and speculated in academic circles in India today. But the more important

question perhaps is what sociological consequences might take place if they return and what if they do not.

Let us first see what adaptations may be required if they return. Physical adaptation may not be much of a problem for those who have been living in the Himalayas but will definitely be a problem for those who are settled in the plains. Economically, they will have to adapt to the new economic system introduced by China while they leave a void in the region itself. The tourists may be denied an important attraction, that is, their handicrafts.

It is also to be realized that the Tibetan refugees being exposed to the outside world and its hardships for almost three decades now have not only sharpened their faculties more than their native brethren but also acquired some new values, norms and cultural traits. Thus, while accepting the existing norms, values and institutions of Tibet, they may also successfully influence the native Tibetans to accept the new acquisitions made outside Tibet. The recent refugees who have slipped through Nepal are, for instance, found to be admitting their 'inferiority' before the earlier refugees. If the victory of the 'superior' refugees over the 'inferior' natives does not take place then the former may exist as cultural enclaves within the larger Tibetan cultural milieu.

A sociologist may stretch his imagination further and claim that the local Buddhist groups may gradually be assimilated with the larger Hindu society in the absence of cultural and religious reinforcements which the Tibetans have been providing since 1959. In fact, the local Buddhists were gradually being Hinduised until the arrival of the Dalai Lama, who helped the to bolster their confidence and revive many dying institutions including the monastic life itself.

It is perhaps easier to guess what may happen 'if they do not return' than 'if they return' for we can talk more confidently about a familiar environment than an unfamiliar one. Physically, they have already adapted themselves to the various regions where they have settled. Socio-culturally, there may be more influence of westernization than Hinduisation in the time to come. Economically, they may bring about greater competition for the limited 'service' occupations. Optimistically, they will contribute immensely to the tourist economy of the region and the high-altitude economy which is rather neglected till today.

Politically, they may find themselves treated as second-class citizens without protection and patronage unless they get themselves naturalized and enjoy the benefits of a scheduled tribe as some of them have done in the region in question. But if they choose not to be naturalized, the situation may compel them to form a strong, politically well-coordinated ethnic group and thereby add a new dimension to the ethnic structure of the region. Consequently, the Himalayas where most of the Tibetan refugees have settled may grow more vulnerable to ethnic tensions and conflicts.

Footnotes

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3. Eva K. Dargyay, *Tibetan Village Communities: Structure and Change,* New Delhi: Vikas, 1982.
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5. R. A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization,* London: Faber and Faber, 1972, p.94-95.
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13. Dorsh Marie Devoe, *Survival of a Refugee Culture: The Longterm Gift Exchange between Tibetan Refugees and Donors in India,* Ph.D. disser., Univ. of California, 1983, pp. 63-64.
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