

XI. TIBETANS IN EXILE

Economic Pursuits and Ethnicity

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The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 forced over 80,000 Tibetan nationals out of their country and made them take refuge in countries on the southern slope of the mighty Himalaya. In 1976, there were as many as 68,748 or 83.3 percent of them in India; Nepal had 8,673 or 10.5 percent, Bhutan, 3,275 or 4.0 and the remaining were distributed in various countries like Canada, Europe, Japan, Switzerland and the United States.

The objective of this paper is to discuss their economic pursuits and ethnic relations with their neighbouring societies and see if the former has anything to do about the latter. For the sake of neatness I have chosen here to take up only those places which have over 3,000 Tibetan refugees. Table 1 shows their population distribution in 1976.

Table 1: Major Tibetan refugee settlements. 1976.

Places	Persons	% of total refugee population
1. Arunachal Pradesh	6,247	7.6
2. Chandragiri, Orissa	3,690	4.5
3. Darjeeling	6,448	7.8
4. Dehradun and Mussourie	11,369	13.8
5. Dharamsala	3,591	4.4
6. Ladakh	4,177	5.1
7. Mysore, Karnataka	17,077	20.7
8. Shimla Hills	3,140	3.8
9. Bhutan	3,275	4.0
10. Nepal	8,673	10.5

Source: *Tibet Under Chinese Communist Rule*, 1976, pp.206-7.

This paper is adapted from the author's book entitled *Flight and Adaptation: Tibetan Refugees in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, forthcoming).

This distribution of Tibetan refugees is already over a decade old now. There has been increase or decrease in every place mentioned in Table 1. For instance, in Arunachal Pradesh, their population is reported to have increased from 6,247 in 1976 to 35,000 by September 1985 (Sentinel 1985). Thus, population figures of the refugees are not to be taken as accurate. In fact, this is one of the major problems of refugee studies pointed out by Murphy (1955:18) and Holborn (Vol. 13:363).

Economic Pursuits

Let me begin the discussion on their economic pursuits

Table 2. Occupational distribution of Tibetan refugees in principal areas of India and outside, 1976.

Places	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Dharamsala	n.a.	5.9	n.a.	33.4	4.1	49.3	1.7	5.6
Mysore	71.0	0.3	n.a.	10.5	12.1	1.5	3.2	1.4
Chandragiri	72.1	n.a.	n.a.	12.1	6.5	n.a.	n.a.	9.3
Arunachal	49.5	n.a.	n.a.	6.3	1.6	10.8	n.a.	31.8
Ladakh	51.8	n.a.	n.a.	7.5	n.a.	4.8	n.a.	35.9
Darjeeling	8.8	6.4	n.a.	21.2	7.9	38.2	1.7	15.8
Dehradun and Mussourie	4.5	0.7	3.4	14.0	2.1	13.6	n.a.	61.6
Shimla Hills	n.a.	4.8	28.9	12.0	6.7	37.9	n.a.	9.7
Nepal	9.9	36.0	n.a.	7.4	5.9	17.8	n.a.	23.1
Bhutan	61.1	n.a.	n.a.	5.7	2.7	30.5	n.a.	n.a.

Index:

I = Agriculture

II = Handicrafts

III = Industries

IV = Students and teachers

V = Monks and nuns

VI = Business and office

VII = Old and retired

VIII = Labourers, housewives, etc.

n.a. = Not available

Source: *Tibet Under Chinese Communist Rule*, 1976, Appendix V, pp. 206-7.

Table 2 shows a marked variation in their economic pursuits in the ten major refugee settlements. For instance, there is none in agriculture in Dharamsala and Shimla, and insignificantly few in Darjeeling, Dehradun and Mussourie, and Nepal. On the other hand, Chandragiri has

72.1 percent in this sector. Even places like Mysore, Ladakh and Bhutan have more than 50 percent in it. One of the major reasons for this in the latter two cases is the way they reclaim the land there, build their own houses, roads, and canals and make the land cultivable (HT 1969). In Mysore, the settlement itself is established for agricultural purposes. But in all these places, including Arunachal, the high percentage of refugees in agriculture is also due to lack of alternative employment opportunities.

It should be noted, however, that wherever they are engaged in agriculture they had cleared the forest by themselves and made the area cultivable. To quote Phadnis (1969):

Tibetan farmers have cleared dense tropical forests infested with unfamiliar wild life to establish agricultural settlements in the table-top plateau of Bylakuppe and Mundegod in Mysore, Mainpat in Madhya Pradesh, Chandragiri in Orissa and around Changlang and Tezu in NEFA (Arunachal).

This is also true of many other places in South Asia.

The technology of agriculture, however, varies significantly in the Himalayan and Deccan regions. All over the Himalaya, no matter what percentage of them are engaged in agriculture, or what amount of land they cultivate, the most important agricultural implements are plough, spade, fork, and rake. But in the Deccan regions the use of tractors is common among them too. Some such tractors are received as gifts from abroad while others are either bought or hired from nearby places. But irrigation facilities are virtually lacking everywhere. They have to depend, as most of their neighbouring societies, on the rain water. But it is to be noted that the cooperatives have made a significant contribution not only to their agricultural production by lending tractors or supplying fertilizers and seeds but also by helping them to market their crops (Richards, 1983).

Coming to handicrafts, Table 2 shows that there is none in this sector in Chandragiri, Arunachal, Ladakh, and Bhutan. Even in Mysore and Dehradun and Mussourie areas the percentage is negligible. Their percentage is rather low in Dharamsala, Shimla and Darjeeling also. On the other hand, Nepal has more than one third of its Tibetan refugees in this occupation. As a matter of fact, these informations are already outdated. Handicrafts is actually one of the major occupations of these refugees all over the Himalaya today. But the

same in south India is reportedly not so popular. Unlike there, it is one of the most popular occupations in the Himalayan regions not only among these refugees but also among many of their neighbouring peoples.

About industries, the only major areas which have Tibetan refugees engaged in it are Dehradun, Mussourie and Shimla. But there is a wide percentage difference between these two places: while the former has only 3.4 percent in it the latter has 28.9 percent in the same. This marked difference between these two Himalayan regions is difficult to explain here for two reasons. One, the term 'industries' has not been explained in the source, and two, I have no first hand experience of these areas. Since handicrafts usually include cottage and small-scale industries this term probably refers here to 'factories'. But I am not sure.

With regard to businessmen and office workers also the distribution of Tibetan refugees is indeed wide. There are refugees of this category in all the areas listed above except Chandragiri in Orissa. Mysore has only 1.5 percent in this category and Ladakh too has 4.8 percent only. On the other hand, Dharamsala has about 50 percent in this category and all other remaining areas have above 10 percent in it.

The percentage of refugees in office and business occupations of an area is believed to have a direct relationship with the percentage of literacy in that area. Though corresponding figures are not readily available this is perhaps largely true. But Dharamsala is the special case because the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is situated there and a large number of Tibetan youths are employed in various establishments though on a meagre salary. Excluding this special case, the higher percentage of refugees in this category in most Himalayan region compared to the Deccan regions is so probably because in the former, most of them are privately settled. They have opportunities for better education and wider contact with the outside world. Such opportunities are obviously limited in the agricultural settlements of the south. Being settled away from the cities and neighbouring peoples, they have lots of difficulties in getting into these professions though cultural purity is better preserved in such areas.

It has been noticed that there is a growing tendency among them to go for service and business in both Himalayan and Deccan regions. For instance, a survey conducted by Tsering Tsamdha in 1984 shows that 52.3 percent of the refugees in Chandragiri have business and 15.9 percent have business-cum-labour as secondary occupation (1984:75).

This increase is significant given the fact that there was none in this profession in 1976.

Now I shall discuss the category of labourers and housewives, who are curiously lumped together in the source. It is indeed difficult to keep these together but we do not have separate data on them either. That there is none in this category in Bhutan indicates, however, that housewives here mean those who do fully participate in economic activities. The same reason may explain why Mysore has only 1.4 percent in this category. It is thus plausible that Tibetan housewives elsewhere are basically engaged as labourers.

Table 2 shows that this category constitutes 61.6 percent of the refugees in Dehradun and Mussourie, followed by 35.9 percent in Ladakh, 31.8 percent in Arunachal and 23.1 percent in Nepal. Elsewhere the percentage is less than 20. They are mostly engaged in the construction sites of roads, bridges and buildings in these Himalayan regions where landslides destroy such constructions frequently. To quote Dasgupta (1976):

Presently they are working as labourers for the Border Roads Organization. One can see them in any hill region – Shimla, Kulu, Kangra or Mandi in Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh or NEFA – men and women clearing up landslides, widening border roads or working at construction sites.

Roads construction is an ongoing work in Bhutan also but most of the labourers there are either Indians or Nepalese. A Bhutanese or Tibetan is seldom seen as a labourer there.

With the exception of Dharamsala and Shimla, the refugees in this category are largely concentrated in the Himalayan regions. This is precisely because the Deccan refugees have little scope of it. Though the refugees of Arunachal and Ladakh have fairly large percentage of people in Agriculture too, the only major alternative for them is to work as labourers.

Let me now turn to other three categories given in Table 2, namely, students and teachers, monks and nuns, and old and retired. The teachers are certainly an occupational group but not the rest, not even monks and nuns in the strictest sense of the term. The activities of these people may have been highly commercialized, their traditional discipline eroded, and so forth but in principle they are supposed to shun the worldly passions and strive for renunciation to accomplish *moksha*

or salvation. Whatever they receive are not payments in true sense but gifts and donations for the ritual service they provide to the lay.

The only area where the monks and nuns constitute 12.1 percent is Mysore: in all other places the percentage is below 8 and surprisingly there is none in Ladakh according to the source of information here. It is indeed strange to have 4,177 Tibetan refugees without a single monk or nun. But there is little that one can do about it.

Similarly, it is strange that even 16 years after their stay in India there was not a single old or retired person in 1976 in areas like Chandragiri, Arunachal, Ladakh, Dehradun and Mussourie, Shimla, Nepal and Bhutan. The number of such persons is only 3.2 percent in Mysore and 1.7 percent each in Dharamsala and Darjeeling? I cannot imagine any reason why this should be so even if I momentarily accept that this is not absurd. But absurd it is. Though the average longevity of these refugees is reportedly rather low due to their food-habits and initial hardships, there must have been some old, if not retired persons in 1976 in every area because the refugees fleeing their homeland were not only children and youths but also middle-aged people.

One of the most popular occupations that they have in all places is the selling of a popular brew called *chang* which is prepared out of fermented rice, wheat, millet or barley. This is believed to be profitable particularly in the Himalayan regions where it is almost a cultural trait of most people to drink it. The cold climate of these regions favours those who sell it and provides the drinkers a pretext to drink.

It is important to note that the selling of *chang* is looked down upon in the plains of India and even the Dalai Lama is aware of this. This is indicated by one of his statements that Tibetan culture should not be equated with *chang* selling (Suroor 1985). But the Himalayan peoples have no such reservation against this profession. It is not only socially legitimized but also a part of their cultural life.

On the whole it is observed that the Tibetan refugees have more successful economic pursuits in the Himalayan than in the Deccan regions. This is probably because most of them in the former regions are privately settled while in the latter most of them are settled by the government. Of course, they are also less visible in the Himalayan regions, which makes it easier for them to get into the various professions than in the south where they have a high visibility.

One hopes that the situation in the Himalayan regions would be much better if the Indo-Tibetan trade were on and there were no restrictions on the foreigners to visit most of these places. But if they

had prospered more they would have invited more resentment of their neighbours too. In fact, a jealousy against them is already noticed everywhere. In Arunachal, for instance, the Tibetan refugees are considered as a 'problem'. The same is also true of north India where the local people have begun expressing resentment over the Tibetans' acquiring landed property allegedly under pseudo names in places like Rohru, Hatkoti, Khara Pathar, Hunur, and Kotkai in Himachal Pradesh (Sadhu 1983).

Ethnicity

These phenomena bring us to the next important question — ethnicity. I begin the discussion with an extensive quotation from a special report on Darjeeling and Sikkim areas by the editor of *Tibetan Review*. (Wangyal, 1978:14) He writes:

The most distinctive feature of education — or any other aspect of life in Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Gangtok — is the all-pervasive influence of Nepali culture, more specifically, language... In most Tibetan homes in this region you will find at least some of the members of the family chatting in Nepali. Even the tradition-conscious monastic walls have yielded to this linguistic onslaught... Now many Tibetans are trying to ban the speaking of Nepali at home, although it is difficult to maintain this enthusiasm for long. Invasion of Nepali language seems less successful in wealthier Tibetan homes.

He adds:

Although the medium of instruction in the Central Tibetan schools are (*sic.*) supposed to be English, teachers here insist on using only Nepali... Rare exceptions apart, the Nepali teachers do not know the first thing about Tibetan culture, nor do they care.

This report cannot be taken lightly because of the following reasons. One, it contains the views of many Tibetans in the region collected and presented by one of the most learned Tibetans. Two, this gives us an idea of how the Tibetan refugees feel about the numerically dominant Nepalese in the region. Third, it also gives some idea of the Tibetan view of how the Nepalese look at them. Finally, it shows that what matters most in this region is the Tibetan-Nepali relationship.

I intend to make a few comments here by way of clarification and envisaging a better understanding between these two ethnic groups in future. Tsering Wangyal, the reporter, has rightly pointed out that the Nepali language has an 'all-prevasive influence' on the Tibetans. But the same influence also pervades a host of other ethnic groups like the Lepchas, Bhutias, Marwaris, Biharis, and many other Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups like the Limbus (Chongs), Newars, Rais, Mangars, and Gurungs, who are commonly subsumed under the Nepali community. Worse than the Tibetans, many members of these groups cannot even converse in any language other than Nepali.

This situation, however, is not a creation of a 'linguistic onslaught'. Language often acts independent of the people who use it. For it has its own life and vitality, which cannot be always explained in terms of the life and vitality of those who own it. 'Onslaught' or 'invasion' is a value loaded term usable only when the speakers of a particular language force upon other linguistic groups to use that language, which is possible only if the linguistically dominant group controls the state too.

With special reference to the Central Tibetan schools, that the teachers 'insist on using only Nepali' is a sweeping allegation. First of all, most of the teachers in such schools are non-Nepalese and they teach in either English or Tibetan or Hindi. A Nepali teacher may often take resort to the Nepali language not because he is not able to explain in English or Hindi but because he hopes to make the students understand better. Should English — the recommended medium — be strictly followed at the cost of the students' mental development? Probably not. What purpose does it serve to their culture in any way? After all, English is as alien to them as Hindi or Nepali is. Yes, the Nepali teachers hardly know the Tibetan language, though they are quite familiar with the Tibetan culture, no matter how one may define it.

That the Tibetan children are gradually losing grip on their language is, however, a matter of general concern. For a similar malaise has affected the non-Tibetan societies, including, should you not be surprised, the Nepalese themselves. The grammatical and syntactical standards of most Nepali students have gone down so low that the teachers often wonder what language they are using.

The erosion of the Tibetan language in north India does not seem to be as acute as in Darjeeling. The study of Saklani shows that there is 'not much social interaction between the Tibetans and the local

people' due to linguistic barriers (1984 : 235). Most Tibetans there can speak Hindi fluently but what actually seems to matter in social interaction is the command over the local dialects, which is difficult to master. There is no such problem in Darjeeling but the cost of it is also found to be rather heavy.

The situation in south India is not much different either. Palakshappa's study in the Mundgod settlement, Karnataka shows that the Tibetans have learnt the local language only to the extent they thought it was essential. For instance, he writes:

The Tibetans have not learnt the local language very much but most of them can understand the measurements in the local language very well and have picked up a few words which are helpful in bargaining and so on (1978 : 105).

This is also corroborated by Melynn Goldstein's study in Mundakuppe settlement in Karanataka:

Tibetan interaction with Indians has been restricted to fleeting encounters in the market place and sporadic in employer/employee situations where the Tibetans are in the dominant positions (1978 : 403).

He further maintains that 'there has been virtually no assimilation to Indian cultural and social institutions' (1978 : 403). And their economic prosperity and vigorous protection of cultural traditions is a 'fertile matrix for inter-ethnic resentment, hostility, and conflict' (1978 : 405). This has also been maintained by Dorsh Marie Devoc (1983 : 80):

Jealousy of Tibetan entrepreneurship and benefits bestowed upon them by aid agencies added to their ambivalence about having Tibetans as neighbours.

Thus, though the Tibetan settlements, particularly those established by the government, are often away from the Indian society, both spatially and socially or even culturally, their prosperity and the patronage received by them from Indian and foreign aid agencies do not seem to have gone unnoticed by their neighbours. Some of their neighbours are, of course, still leading lives worse than many Tibetan refugees despite over 40 years of India's independence.

Some bitterness could not probably be avoided even if the Tibetan refugees had learnt the local language well and mixed with the local people intimately as in Darjeeling. Otherwise, the Bhutia resentment would not have arisen against these refugees in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Thus cultural similarity or intimate social intercourse does not seem to necessarily guarantee a situation free of ethnic tensions and conflict.

Let us now see if all this is true of Nepal. The discussion here is based on a doctoral thesis by Claes Corlin. The study was made in 1973 in a Tibetan refugee settlement of Rasuwa, north of Kathmandu Valley. The relevant part of her study is quoted here:

The refugees' relations to their close neighbours, the Tamang, are characterized by a large amount of cooperation and understanding (the culture of the two groups being very much alike). There are, however, certain boundaries — especially as regards intermarriage — across which cooperation cannot be expected. Conflicts between the two groups have so far been scarce, but there is a certain latent tension. In the field of ritual, some local practices of the Tamangs have also influenced the Tibetans (1975 : 135).

The main reason behind this tension is jealousy among the Tamangs, which has grown out of the rapid prosperity of the Tibetan refugees. Being in Nepal, they have received much more financial and other aids from foreign countries than what has been possible for those in India. It is this fact which has made handicrafts in Nepal a real success. And since this employs more than one third of their total population in that country, their economic base is well founded.

The worst situation is probably in Bhutan. Though there is practically no difference of primordial values between the Bhutanese and the Tibetans, the relationship between the two groups is not at all healthy. This is clearly evident from the *Report of the Tibetan Refugees' Problems in Bhutan*, prepared by the Office of Tibet, New York (1979). This contains 33 typed pages.

In 1979, Bhutan approached several European governments for accommodating about 4,000 Tibetan refugees living there. This move had followed a resolution of Bhutan's National Assembly that 'the refugees who refuse Bhutanese citizenship should be sent out' (Tribune 1979). Soon after this resolution was passed the Tibetan refugees in India sought to meet the Bhutanese authorities and submit a memorandum but were reportedly refused. Finally, the Tibetan

Youth Congress had appealed to the United Nations General Secretary Kurt Waldheim 'to use his influence on the Bhutanese authorities not to expel the 4,000 Tibetan refugees living there'.

It is difficult to ascertain the actual bone of contention between them but it is probably not as simple as the refusal by the Tibetans to accept the Bhutanese citizenship. The actual reason may be anything but the economic prosperity and the alleged sense of cultural superiority of the Tibetans have certainly aggravated the cleavage between the two.

Conclusion

The Bhutanese example is a sad pointer to the fact that physical, cultural, religious, social, and to a large extent even linguistic similarities do not necessarily avert ethnic conflicts. When the ethnic boundaries based on such primordial affinities and ideologies disappear, new boundaries seem to appear and keep the ethnicity alive. Such tendencies also appear stronger in areas which have more scarce environmental resources.

The question of citizenship has an important bearing on their ethnicity. If they were naturalized, their confidence and morale would be boosted and would also equip them with better tools to face their neighbours on equal grounds. Most importantly, this would help them to get rid of the humiliating label of 'refugee' attached to them. But this would also deprive them of the foreign aids and various Indian assistance packages which accrue to them as refugees. Above all, the Dharamsala administration feels, perhaps correctly, that this might jeopardize their national/cultural identity and the struggle for an independent Tibet.

The choice is indeed hard to make. Till now, the pro-identity or anti-citizenship group has dominated. But what if the pro-citizenship (but not necessarily anti-identity) group takes over? Much depends on how a compromise can be arrived at between these two choices. Adamancy of their view may be the most dangerous mistake they will ever commit in their history.

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