



# TIBETANS IN DARJEELING: A PROFILE

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## Abstract:

In the proposed paper I would like to focus on the educational and economic status of the Tibetan youths of Darjeeling, both in the settlements under the CTA and outside - in the town as a whole. The **objectives also include** the challenges faced by the Tibetan youths of multi ethnic society of Darjeeling to maintain their cultural heritage and refugee identity.

Though not an immediate neighbour of Tibet, Darjeeling has a long history of connection with Tibet because of its proximity to the Buddhist states of Sikkim and Bhutan. Due to the old historical ties, several Tibetan families set up their homes in parts of Darjeeling and their number increased considerably from onwards the politically critical decades preceding 1959. While those who are living in the settlements and attending the Tibetan schools find it easier to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage, the challenges of upholding Tibetan cultural and linguistic heritage are difficult for those who are living outside, among the multi ethnic society of Darjeeling. This naturally raises question regarding their commitment to maintain their refugee identity. Tibetans complain of economic hardships and unemployment among the educated youths leading to out migration from the settlements. This naturally brings in the related questions of their contact with the greater Tibetan community outside Darjeeling.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Tibetans, Economy, Settlements.

As for methodology, the study is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected through field studies on the basis of standard methods of interviews, case studies and observation among the Tibetans both in and out of the settlements.

The study is expected to highlight the challenges faced by the Tibetan refugee community in the multi ethnic town of Darjeeling - the challenges of balancing education and profession on the one hand and cultural heritage and identity on the other.

The article is based on personal observation and some discussion with the inmates of the centre. Some books and articles have also been consulted. So the article has been one general observation about the Tibetans in Darjeeling with little field work among some of the inmates of the settlement.

## Introduction:

There has always been a flow of persecuted and dislocated people throughout the human history. Millions have fled from the reign of terror in their homeland seeking refuge and a new life in another society, culture and polity. Most of them have no choice but to escape from intolerable threat and danger, breaking away with the bonds of their heritage and become part of a different national tradition, where their life undergoes a change under the pressure of new demands caused by the need for assimilation. In 1950, office of the High Commissioner for Refugees was created by United Nation General Assembly by Resolution 428 (v) and began its operation on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1951. According to United High Commission for Refugees' 1951 Convention—"All persons in need, regardless of their immigration status, share certain human rights under the international law and proclaims discrimination on the grounds of national origin and provides that all persons shall enjoy this right", "to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum for persecution" and thus defines refugees as—"A person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR, 1995).

India, one of the largest developing nation in South Asia have given asylum to many refugees which include Afghans, Bhutanese, Nepalis, Iraqis, Iranians and many others. "India is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol" (Chimni, 2003). It has not adopted national legislation for the protection of refugees. India's international obligations are derived from the source such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights applicable to both citizens and non-citizens. Therefore there

is no any specific status for refugees; all of them are regarded as "foreigners". However, refugees in India does not enjoy same right as its citizens but they are free to work and own property in India. Tibetans who fled to India are not ordinary refugees. Tibetans have a very unique and extra ordinary history, rather, a story which often demonstrates the vitality of their culture. They have taken refuge not as individual but rather as a national polity that has escaped the destruction taking place in Tibet and has sought and been given the protective mantle of a neighbouring friendly country. India was the best sanctuary Tibetan polity could have found and the survival of Tibetan culture in the Indian diaspora is one of the wondrous and hopeful events of our time. Tibetan refugee in exile is considered as one of the most successful refugee community in the world. They have managed to rebuild their lives in completely alien environment achieving almost total economic self-reliance. Central Tibetan Administration in exile has successfully rehabilitated the Tibetan refugees in organized society creating an environment where Tibetans have been able to maintain their age long rich cultural tradition and uniqueness.

### **The focus of the paper is on the Tibetans of Darjeeling.**

The Darjeeling district is situated in the northern part of the state of West Bengal and is regarded as a part of the Eastern Himalayas. The district used to have three hill subdivisions Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. Of these, Kalimpong has been converted into a separate district a few months ago. The three subdivisions have three towns by the same name. Our focus in this paper is on the Darjeeling town. The district of Darjeeling is situated just adjacent to Sikkim which used to be an independent Buddhist kingdom. To be more accurate, the region comprising Darjeeling district used to be a part of Sikkim till 1835 when it was handed over to the British East India Company by the Chogyal, the King of Sikkim and the British, after some administrative reorganisations gave shape to the district of Darjeeling with three hill subdivisions and one subdivision in the foothills.

The state of Sikkim, at one point of time used to extend as far as a place called Thang La near Phari, a town in Chumbi Valley in Tibet with which it always maintained a close contact. Because of this proximity to Tibet, the influence of Tibet on the ethnic composition, religion and culture of Sikkim used to be profound. The influence of Tibet, the Bhutia community of Sikkim are of Tibetan origin that had migrated from Tibet in various phases. The religion they practice is basically the Buddhism of Tibet. Because Sikkim used to be an independent kingdom this became the state religion of Sikkim and the Bhutias enjoyed a very special privileged status in the pre merger period.

The district of Darjeeling, by virtue of its historical ties with Sikkim and geographical proximity to Tibet shared some of the demographic and cultural characteristics of Sikkim. There are the Bhutias who practise the same religion with the difference that they are numerically fewer than in Sikkim and did not have any state religion like Sikkim and their dependence on Tibet either for political or for cultural matters were less.

In addition to the Bhutias there were also some Tibetans who had settled in Darjeeling district before the flight of His Holiness, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. The border trade that developed through mountain passes was the main reason for early Tibetan settlers in Darjeeling. This trade began to develop after Darjeeling was separated from Sikkim after 1835. There are several references to this trade in the British accounts from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The trade expanded from the last quarter of the century when Kalimpong became a part of the district. Kalimpong originally belonged to Sikkim but was occupied by Bhutan. It was returned to the British by Bhutan after the country was defeated in a war with the British in 1864. Kalimpong was more suitably located for caravan trade with Tibet as it was closer to the Jelep La. One most important article of trade was wool among other items. After the Young husband expedition in 1904-5 Tibet was forced open to the outside world and this political development also encouraged trade. The route through Jelep La was also used by many Tibetans who visited India for reasons other than trade. Thus there were monks and pilgrims, Tibetan students in the missionary schools of Darjeeling and their parents, political leaders and some activists as well who preferred to use the town as their meeting places for their political discussions. Some of them particularly the traders, even owned houses in the town and began to live there. Thus the Darjeeling region had a considerable number of Tibetan populations even before their country was taken over by the Chinese and the Tibetans began to arrive in the region as refugees. This traditional contact between Tibet and the Darjeeling region facilitated the settlement of the refugees in this place and made their adaptation with the new life easier. Tibetans- both who came before and after 1959 as refugees are scattered in the region. Tibetan Refugees of Darjeeling mostly live in Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre maintained by Government in Exile.

Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre in Darjeeling is a rehabilitation centre for the Tibetan Refugees in Darjeeling Himalayan region. "Established in October 2nd 1959, the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre (TRSHC) has become one of the most powerful symbols of resilience of the Tibetan community in Exile. Unlike the rehabilitation strategy for permanent agricultural settlements in Southern India which were built at the behest of Tibetan Government-in-exile in Dharamsala and the Government of India, the TRSHC emerged spontaneously with the idea that no refugee could ever be rehabilitated in the fullest sense of the word without "Self-Help", a realization that this "vital element could only come from within the community from within one's selves". Guided by the ethic of "Self-Help", the self-settled Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town could achieve better integration into a multi-ethnic host society despite the peril of living in protracted exile" (Basu, 2010). Funds were raised from local charity that led to the starting of this centre by Mr. Gyalpo Thondup. Tibetan Refugees who had come over the Himalayas in India through a hazardous trek found initial relief in this centre. This Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre holds important place in the heart of Tibetan Refugees because of the fact that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had spent his exile in India following the Chinese invasion of Tibet at that time. "The centre was registered as charitable organization under the Act of Government of India" (Thondup, 1970). In June 1960, centre started a small nursery school. Within the short span of time, the school became full-fledged primary school. The school is affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education, Delhi and has grades from pre-primary to class 12 with Humanities and Commerce streams at the higher secondary level. The children are not only provided with free-education up to class 12 but also receive clothing, meals and textbooks. However those students who continue to receive financial assistance from centre are required to work up to 3 to 5 years once they complete their education. If they get a better employment offer during this period, they have to pay the amount received for their college education to centre. Centre also sponsors specialised and technical training for potential candidates. Career counselling too receives equal importance with frequent visit of trained staff from Department of Education, Dharamsala Counsellor. The Government of India has also provided special status to Tibetan Refugees by setting up special CTSA schools that helps to preserve

the refugee group's unique language, culture and identity. Higher education is also available to Tibetan students in India in the Indian universities and at a few Tibetan institutes.

### **Tibetans refugees in the town of Darjeeling.**

The Tibetan settlement in Darjeeling is known as the Hermitage. The settlement is host to 130 Tibetan families. The settlement which is a rehabilitation centre has been a part of multifarious activities which ranges from handicrafts, training of artisans and craftsmen. The production of handicrafts continues to be their mainstay both in terms of activity as well as source of income. Beside traditional items such as Tibetan carpets, wood carving, metal and leather works are done in the centre so that these items would find a ready market in Darjeeling and elsewhere. The centre has been exporting to 36 countries all over the world (Report TRSHC 1999). Over the past many decades, the centre has been training persons in various crafts. The objectives of training individuals in the various crafts is to make persons able of self-supporting, to ensure that the skills and expertise are passed on to new generations of workers and thus ensuring the survival and growth of traditional Tibetan crafts and arts.

Tibetans can be found living outside the settlements in Darjeeling and their life style is quite different from those in the centre because Tibetans living in the settlements are living in the Tibetan atmosphere and it's easy for them to maintain their cultural practices. Children's of Tibetans those living outside goes to Central School for Tibetans or other boarding schools. As compared to Tibetans living in settlement and Tibetans living outside, we could easily find that the Tibetans living outside settlements are much more economically sound. Most of the Tibetans living outside the settlements belonged to pre-1959 refugees whose forefathers brought lot of riches with them and can easily pull few generations through any contingency (is general impression of local people). Those Tibetans living outside are more exposed to external influence and take up many non-Tibetan habits and practices. However they have been able to practice their religion because since Darjeeling had old connections with Tibet, some ethnic groups like Bhutias and some Nepalis profess same kind of Buddhism. Tibetans outside settlements are engaged in different professions though in general most of them run their own business enterprises. Some of the few big markets which have come up in Darjeeling, the Mahakal market and the Dragon market which sells all kinds of clothes, the general impression is that the owners are actually Tibetans who have opted for the surname Bhutia. Without a proper fieldwork among them it is not possible to arrive at a conclusion in this respect and they are usually reluctant to disclose their identity and status i.e. whether they are refugees or Indian citizens, Tibetans or Bhutias. There being very close affinity between the Tibetans and the Bhutias it is possible, as the general impression goes, that some of the Tibetans have opted for the Bhutia surnames as this enables them to avail of the privileges provided to the ST (Schedule Tribe) by the Government of India.

Unlike the settlements in the South or in some other parts of the heartland of India, the settlement Centre of Darjeeling is not agricultural. Sudeep Basu, in his article mentioned that unlike the other settlements the centre does not seek help from the Dharamsala but it is independent. Only in need does it seek assistance.

The housing and the living standard of the inmates in the Settlement do not serve as a clear cut objective indicator of the levels of prosperity or deprivation of its inmates. However the general impression among the local inhabitants is that the refugees and the Tibetans in general are rich people who have been able to bring riches from their homeland. Basu in his paper also cited his experience in this respect – “On having made a point to the Nepali youths in a deliberately provocative manner in the form of “how poor the Tibetans appear from the look of the houses in which they live,” they immediately replied with the intention to correct, in their judgment, my somewhat touristic perception or lack of knowledge about the actual status of the Tibetans living in TRSHC. “What others (they were referring to the tourists) see in the refugee camp is eyewash. Yeh sab dikhava hai (this is only a show). Woh bare amir hai (Most of them are well off) and are in government (gzhung) jobs, have with them ration cards, doing good business (tshong las byas) in town area.” (Basu, 2010)

The older Nepalis are reconciled to the fact that the Tibetans are characteristically hardworking than they are which is the reason for their economic success in the Darjeeling area. The claim by Nepali youths that the refugees at the Centre are not poor (a kind of perceptual data) had to be corroborated by collecting further data in the form of statements made by other ethnic hosts in the area. While we are unable either to accept or refute these apparent impressionistic remarks of such non Tibetan youths, a personal interaction with some families in the settlement gave the impression that the second and the third generation youths are hard-working with most of them going for good education that fetches them good jobs and respectable income.

Some of the Case Studies are given below:

#### **Case study one –**

Parents had moved into the settlement in 1960. They have four children. All of them, barring one have received education from the CSTs and pursued higher education from Darjeeling Colleges. The eldest son is settled in Delhi and is running his own restaurant. He is economically comfortable and even sends some money to the parents for his sibling's higher education. Two of them have completed their college education and pursuing their post graduate studies. It is only the second son that has discontinued his studies after class VIII. He lives in the settlement with his parents.

#### **Case study II**

The mother, a widow lives alone in the Settlement. The eldest son is settled in nearby Sonada where he runs a small restaurant while the eldest daughter is well settled with her own house in Bangalore. Her children are getting good education in English medium schools and she is economically comfortable. The youngest sister is pursuing her post graduate studies from Kolkata.

## Case study III

The mother is a widow and 80 years old.

Her only son is highly educated. After completing studies from CST and graduation from Darjeeling he moved out for PG studies and even completed his doctorate. Now he is working in Visva Bharati, Santiniketan as a teacher

## Case Study IV

Of the four siblings in the family, three are well educated and settled in Kolkata. Only the youngest brother continues to live in the hermitage and works in the carpentry section. All the three siblings are married and are able to give good education to their children. They themselves have completed their graduation from St Joseph's College Darjeeling.

## Case Study V

There are six siblings in the family. This family is special in the sense that of the six siblings in the family two have worked in the army and three have come back to Darjeeling to live in the hermitage. The eldest is an army man who after retirement came back to hermitage to his parents. He himself has had no higher education but both of his two children are studying in Delhi. His younger brother, another army man, is has settled down in Dehradun. One brother lives in Dharamsala and the sister is married and settled in Nepal. All are giving good school education to their children.

According to the Tibetan demographic survey (CTA 2009) the unemployment rate among the Tibetan youths is as high as 75 percent. The major reason is the lack of employment opportunities in the settlements. While that may be true, in Darjeeling my discussion with the families in the settlement reveals the fact that almost all the children generally the second and particularly the third generation have had good education and have moved out of the settlement for higher studies. This has empowered them to go for respectable jobs and even to start their own business. They visit their parents in the settlements and even invite them to move out and settle with them out of Darjeeling. The parents however, due to their long association with the place show reluctance to move out of the settlement.

The settlement in Darjeeling as we mentioned above is a Self help centre where the inmates are trained in various traditional crafts and earn from these. The young generation too follow the same motto of Self help – in a different sense. They have opted for education and have qualified themselves for jobs. It does not matter whether their parents had brought riches from Tibet as the local youths commented, they have empowered themselves through hard work and education.

The observation of the local youths may be equally applicable to the Tibetans living outside the settlements as scattered community. Compared to those who are living in the settlement these people are more open to modern lifestyle. They have their own houses and usually run small business. The general perception is that the Tibetans in Darjeeling are economically comfortable. Most of them are running small business establishments and even some hotels and big shops. Some jewellery shops are also owned by them.

The overall picture of the Tibetans of Darjeeling is one of successful adaptation. It is true that the children of those who are in the settlement are moving out of Darjeeling in search of jobs. But most of them have acquired educational qualification beyond school level and have become well settled. They are providing even better education to their children. Those who are living outside the settlement are carrying on different business activities. The general impression is that they are rich people. That may or may not be true but there is no doubt that by dint of their hard work they have been able to curve out a comfortable life for themselves.

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