

**TIBETAN REFUGEES IN INDIA:  
PRESENT AND FUTURE  
A Case Study of Dharamsala**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of requirements  
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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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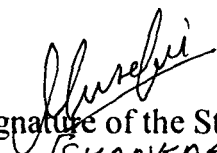
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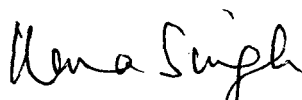
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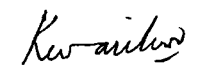
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I dedicate this work to my parents, who brought me to this level, so as to write this piece of work.

Shankar Musafir

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## **PREFACE**

The exodus of Tibetan refugees from their country, as a result of the Chinese aggression has led to the formation of a large community of refugees spread across the world. India is the country, which has the largest number of such refugees and hence, occupies a significant role in the study of the Tibetan diaspora.

The large community of Tibetan refugees in the country presents a host of problems to the host nation (India). Especially, with a population touching 1.5 lakh, it becomes difficult to treat them as refugees when they have spent almost half a century in India. They can no longer be called refugees, as they have settled, married, acquired non-movable properties, started businesses and increased in numbers out here.

The town Dharamsala has a special place in the minds of the Tibetan diaspora and the world in general, as it is the residence of the spiritual leader Dalai Lama and also the seat of the Tibetan Government-in- Exile. Popularly known as the 'Little Lhasa', it attracts thousands of domestic and international tourists, who want to have a glimpse of the Tibetan way of life. With the internationalization of the Tibet issue, the importance of the place has increased much more.

The town was once a British hill station, which was abandoned in 1947, after the British left India. Many bungalows were left vacant. When the Indian government was looking for a place to settle the Dalai Lama, Mr. Nowrojee, who was then taking care of the bungalows in Dharamsala, offered the place for the purpose. It was readily agreed and the Dalai Lama moved to Dharamsala in 1960. Ever since the town has been bubbling with activity.

But importantly, this huge influx and settlement of foreigners in northern India was bound to have its impact. With the constant global interest in the Tibet issue, Dharamsala developed into a favourite tourist spot to the Western tourist. Tourism industry flourished and it gave livelihoods to the Tibetans and they continued to grow in number and make it a permanent settlement.

Over a period of time, Dharamsala has had a significant impact on the society and economy of the hill region (Himachal Pradesh). There is no doubt increase in tourism industry but most of it has been manipulated by the Tibetans, leaving the locals aside. There is pollution in the town and there is stress on resources like water, forests etc. There are reports of the engagement of Tibetans in anti-social activities like drug trafficking and clashing with the locals. Dharamsala has certainly changed because of the Tibetans.

This dissertation seeks to study the development of the Dharamsala as a town, from a small hill station to a cosmopolitan town and to study the changes brought about by the Tibetans in the society and economy of the region.

Although, a lot of work has been done on the Tibet issue, very few works have been done on the Tibetan refugee settlements in India. Two major works on the settlements include the works of Girija Saklani and T.C. Palakshappa. Girija Saklani's '*The Uprooted Tibetans*' is a study of Dharamsala, Dehradun and Delhi (Majnu Ka Tila). As the area is too wide, she has not been able to give much attention to Dharamsala. Moreover, she has delved just with the living conditions of the refugees and not their effect on the local society and economy. On the other hand T.C. Palakshappa's work is on the Mungod Tibetans in Karnataka and hence does not include Dharamsala.

This dissertation deals exclusively with Dharamsala, which has eluded attention so far. Although, Dharamsala has been talked about in all researches on the Tibet issue, but the real town is left out. It is just seen in the context of the government in exile and not as a society or tourist place.

Chapter 1 discusses the present social, economic and cultural profile of the Tibetans living in Dharamsala,

their problems, advantages, businesses, social life and involvement in anti-social activities.

The second Chapter deals with the phenomena of the increased importance of Dharamsala as a tourist and cultural center, due to the presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetans. The study will deal with every aspect of Tibetans, which attracts the tourists to the town. It also studies the impact of Tibetans on the society and economy of Dharamsala.

The third Chapter analyses the tensions between the local Himachalis(Indians) and the Tibetan community in the town. It will not only focus on social but also business frictios and also the cases of clashes between them.

The fourth Chapter deals with the question of the possible return of Tibetan refugees to their homeland. If Tibet becomes free tomorrow, will the Tibetans running successful businesses, leave it all and go to Tibet?

The whole research is based on primary sources, which includes interviews and interactions with the Tibetan refugees, local Himachalis and Indians visiting the place. It may be mentioned here that the Tibetans in Dharamsala are not open to any interviews or questionnaires. They try to keep away from researchers, who ask questions dealing with sensitive issues. As in the case of this study, the survey on the



prospects of return of Tibetans to their homeland was not respected by all Tibetans. In fact, a large number of Tibetans refused to comment on the issue. They said they cannot take personal decisions on the Tibet issue. There were others, who were ready to comment but said that they would like to keep their names secret as they feared repression from some section of the Tibetan community in Dharamsala. The data is supported by secondary sources, i.e. works of other authors, who have studied the town in any aspect.

**Chapter 1**  
**Introduction**  
**Exodus of**  
**Tibetan**  
**refugees to**  
**India**

**Chapter 1**  
**Introduction**  
**Exodus of Tibetan refugees to India**

“Today Tibet lives, not within Tibet but outside Tibet.  
Everything that is Tibet – the culture, the religion,  
every aspect of Tibet lives outside Tibet”

- Kasur Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama’s  
special representative in Washington.

The Chinese ‘occupation’ of Tibet in 1951 suddenly catapulted the land and its people into the wider world of international politics. Finally a determined Chinese campaign to ‘transform’ the tradition bound Tibetan social order by introducing large-scale reforms, threw it into a lot of turmoil. In early 1959, the political events took another turn and there was an outbreak against the Chinese authorities. The Dalai Lama made a dramatic escape and took asylum in India. He was followed by thousands of his devotees, who were tied to the Dalai Lama by strong traditional ties. As Rajesh S. Kharat has put it<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Rajesh S. Kharat- Living on the edge: Tibetan refugees in South Asia, *Asian Profile*, 2003, Vol.31, No.2, pg.92.

“On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1959, the Dalai Lama along with his 13000 followers escaped from Lhasa to seek political asylum in India. After a long and arduous journey through the Himalayas, he finally arrived at Chuthangmo, an Indian checkpost on the border, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1959. From there, he went to Tejpur. In the next few months, another batch of about 80,000 Tibetan refugees took shelter in India and its neighbouring countries, Bhutan and Nepal.”

According to statistics quoted by Tanka B. Subba: “ In 1976, there were as many as 68,748 or 83.3 percent of them in India; Nepal had 8,673; Bhutan had 3275 or 4 percent and the remaining were distributed in various countries like Canada, Europe, Japan, Switzerland and the United States”<sup>2</sup>

Tibetans took refuge in India mainly because their spiritual leader and god king, the Dalai Lama had been given asylum in India. The loyal devotees of the Dalai Lama fled Tibet en mass to follow their leader. The mass exodus continued till the Indo- Tibet border was sealed due to the Sino-Indian War in 1962<sup>3</sup>.

In the immediate years following the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugees taking refuge in India, one of the more urgent needs was a long term rehabilitation

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<sup>2</sup> Tanka B Subba- Tibetans in Exile: Economic pursuits and Ethnicity in K.Warikoo and Dawa Norbu(ed.) *Ethnicity and Politics in Central Asia*.(1992)South Asia Publishers, New Delhi. pg. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Anand Kumar- *Tibet: A source Book*,(1987) Sterling Publishers, New Delhi pg. 23.

programme that would serve to bring all the Tibetan refugees into homogenous Tibetan communities large enough to allow them to preserve their language, traditions and thus preserve their national identity, and of course where they could secure food shelter, medical care, education and a means of livelihood to develop economically self- supporting communities during their period in exile.

To accommodate and help the Tibetan refugees, the government of India set up various transit camps at Misamari(Assam) and Buxar(West Bengal), where the welfare of the refugees was looked after by the Indian administration. In the camps they were given free rations, clothing and cooking utensils, plus medical facilities. To overcome this critical situation, the Dalai Lama approached the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, which was assigned the work pertaining to the relief and rehabilitation of Tibetan refugees, with a request to settle these people in cooler places where they might be temporarily employed<sup>4</sup>.

Responding immediately, the Government of India agreed to send these refugees to various places such as Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Dehradun

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<sup>4</sup> Dawa Norbu – *Tibet: The road ahead*(1997)Harper Collins, New Delhi, pg. 23.

and Mussorie, all hilly areas where most of them were employed in gainful jobs.

Since the majority of the refugees had been either farmers or nomads, the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration requested the Government of India to resettle the Tibetans in agriculture based settlements<sup>5</sup>. Pandit Nehru then wrote to the Chief Ministers of the State governments to ask them if there was any land available in their territories for the resettlement of the Tibetan refugees. He received a positive reply from the Mysore Government. As a result, an area of over 3000 acres of land, situated at Bylakuppe in Karnataka was leased to the Tibetan refugees. In December 1960, the first group of Tibetans was sent to Mysore and adjacent areas of Karnataka, known as Mungod in Belgaum division, from various transit camps located in H.P., Arunachal Pradesh, Kalimpong and Sikkim. The same method was adopted by the Government of India in other parts of the country to rehabilitate these refugees, particularly at Chandragiri in Orissa, Manipat in M.P., Dehradun and Mussorie in U.P.

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<sup>5</sup> Ram Rahul – *Government and Politics in Tibet*(1995) Vikas Publishers, New Delhi, pg.34.

## **Dharamsala**

Dharamshala stood out of this whole gamut of refugee settlements. It became an elite refugee settlement as the Dalai Lama shifted from Mussorie and settled at Dharamsala on Nehru's advise. Dharamsala was the place chosen for setting up the headquarters of the Tibetan government-in-exile. A place about 10 kms from Dharamsala town- Mcleodganj, became the headquarters of the Tibetan government-in-exile, and also a center of pilgrimage for the Tibetans and other followers of Buddhism.

Dharamshala is a small town on the foothills of the Himalayas. Located in the state of Himachal Pradesh in the district of Kangra. It is a twin town in the sense that it can comfortably be divided into two parts- upper Dharamsala and Lower Dharamsala. The upper Dharamsala is commonly known as Mcleodganj. It is here that the Indian government decided to settle the Dalai Lama in 1960.

Some land and houses were given to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugees to form a settlement here, where they can stay until the Tibet issue is resolved. Quite some land was also given on lease to the Tibetans and appropriate arrangements were made for them to make their stay comfortable.

Initially thought to be a temporary settlement, the Tibetans have been now staying in Dharamsala or lets say Mcleodganj for the last 44 years. Several old people who originally trekked from Tibet to India in 1959 have died and only their families survive, who were kids at the time of leaving Tibet.

After the initial hitches and difficulties of refugee life, the Tibetans have managed to set up a government in exile and a life in exile, with the help of the government of India. Not only have they set up a government but also a lively society and economy-in-exile. They have made permanent homes in Dharamsala, married and even had kids. There is a whole new generation of youth, which was born in India and who behave and speak like Indians. Some have even married in India. They were educated here and are doing jobs here. They practice their Buddhist religion and try to maintain the same way of life as in Tibet.

Economically, they have become the kings of the tourism industry in the area, especially with respect to international tourists. The aura of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan craze attracts thousands and thousands of tourists to this hill station. This influx of tourists has led to the proliferation of many enterprises, which includes shops and emporiums, hotels, restaurants, medical stores, taxi operators, tour operators and travel agents.



Many people are interested in the spiritual part of Tibet and hence one can find many meditation centers, yoga and Tibetan medicine centers. Thus, the town has formed an economy of its own, which runs the kitchens of these refugees.

In this sleepy hill station the Tibetans have established many religious, educational, political and cultural institutions, so much so that some parts of Dharamsala such as Totarani, Rait and Kotwali Bazaar have turned into exclusive Tibetan localities (apart from Mcleodganj). The residence of Dalai Lama called the 'Thakchen Choling' is the Indian 'Potala' and includes the personal residence of the Dalai Lama, his office and personal monastery. As it gives a Tibetan look, the town itself has come to be known as the 'Little Lhasa'<sup>6</sup>.

Such a vibrant economy and society, and over that a government, of 'alien' people in a country as diverse as India, is certainly a unique case, especially when the 'aliens' are trying to preserve their identity and culture. How has the society of Dharamsala developed? How has the economy evolved? And how has Dharamsala grown/ transformed as a town?

Over the last 44 years, the Tibetans have made Dharamsala(Mcleodganj) their home. They have survived, settled, increased in numbers and started lucrative

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Kamm- The Little Lhasa in Exile, *Tibetan Review*, October 1976.

businesses in the town. It is but natural that such a large migrant population (now settled, living for around half a century) would certainly have had a socio-economic impact on the identity, culture and economy of such a small town.

Dharamsala has grown from a sleepy little town to a town on the world map. Today more and more people across the world visit this tiny place. As Dibyesh Anand puts it:

“A movement from a poor refugee settlement to one of the most popular tourist destinations in India, a change from a small-dilapidated village to a cosmopolitan small town- these are indicative as well as constitutive of changes within the Tibetan exile community and the local Indian community.”<sup>7</sup>

Within the last 44 years the term ‘refugee’ seems inappropriate for the significant Tibetan population settled in Dharamsala, as now they have permanent shelters and running businesses. They have got all the modern facilities and their kids also get good schooling.

Several scholars studying the issue of refugees have agreed to the point that once a community has lived in a place for considerable time, made permanent houses and increased in numbers, it is inappropriate to give them the

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<sup>7</sup> Dibyesh Anand – A guide to little Lhasa in India, in P.C. Klieger(ed.) *Tibet, self, and the Tibetan*

*diaspora: voices of difference*.pg.15

status of refugees. Hope Simpson says<sup>8</sup> that the refugee, itself means homeless or one, who has to leave his home for some reason. But once these people settle down to normal life, they become a part of the area they are living in and hence are not refugees. This is true to the refugees in Dharamsala as well. It is inappropriate to call them refugees and their study has to be done in this context, as now they are even richer than the locals. These various phenomena make the study of Dharamsala more complex.

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<sup>8</sup> Hope Simpson – *The refugee Problem*,(1939) Oxford University Press, London.pg. 45.

# **Chapter 2**

**TIBETANS IN**

**DHARAMSALA:**

**SOCIETY,**

**ECONOMY AND**

**CULTURAL**

**PROFILE**

## gChapter 2

### TIBETANS IN DHARAMSALA: SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND CULTURAL PROFILE

The typology and the class of the people (Tibetans), which migrated to India needs to be studied in order to understand the development of the present day society and economy of the refugee population in Dharamsala. To which strata of society did those people belong, who came first? If it was a composite mixture, then who had the majority? Which class is revered in the present day society?

According to a study done by Girija Saklani<sup>9</sup>, the Chinese crusade in Tibet was launched against feudalism and theocracy. It became an ideological conflict between ~~monks~~<sup>n</sup> and nobility against communism and Chinese rule. She says that it is clear that Chinese reform and change directly attacked high priests, nobles and landlords, i.e. the upper strata of society. No doubt for these groups there was every threat of their life, property and security of status, a majority of them due to vested interest or otherwise were interested to maintain their traditional politico-religious structures and left Tibet for

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<sup>9</sup> Girija Saklani- *The Uprooted Tibetans*, (1984) Cosmo publications, New Delhi pg.39

the places, where they could find their lives and interests more safe and protected.

According to the Dalai Lama, Tibetan refugees, who followed him, have not come from any single class; they really represent the entire Tibetan population. Among them were lamas of great eminence, learned and respected scholars, about five thousand monks, quite a few government officials, merchants and soldiers and a large number of poor and ordinary peasants<sup>10</sup>.

This is a fact that in the later phases, refugees came from nearly all sections representing different cultural, geographic and economic zones. And an overwhelming majority of these refugees hardly had any correct knowledge of situation inside the country; they were simply spurred on to take the fateful decision of escaping from their own land by the news of the Dalai Lama's escape. They left their country in a state of utter confusion, they were either panicky or felt insecure or were ardent followers of the Dalai Lama.

But those refugees, who were either politically active or were mobilized in resistance movement or belonged to the decision-making group are significant category. Others whose action has not been deliberate or conscious are not important. Refugee elite also

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<sup>10</sup> Gyatso Tenzin – *Freedom in Exile, Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*, (1962) Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, pg. 12.

represents the most critical section of the Tibetan society. They belong to a prominent set and can be called as the pillars of the exiled Tibetan society.<sup>11</sup> Regarding structural and behaviour changes the refugee elite represents the important segment of their society because it is they who are going to set and maintain the standards for the whole society.

This elite community is very prominent in Dharamsala, the headquarters of the Tibetan Government- in- Exile. One can find young lamas in their maroon robes, zipping across the roads of Mcleodganj in Pajero's and Cielo's. Many of the elite groups have the influential positions in the government. Their kids have gone abroad to pursue higher studies, while they run the government. They are a revered lot and everybody follows their way.

Although there isn't much contact between the general population and the elite, the elite people have a special place in the society. They represent the society in all national and international forums. The whole population looks up to them and tries to emulate their ways and manners.

As for the large segment of population, who were agriculturists, the scenario is different. They were not lucky enough to get government jobs and hence started

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<sup>11</sup> Girija Saklani- *The uprooted Tibetans*(1984) Cosmo publications, New Delhi, pg.41

off as road labourers etc. The few who went to the south got some agricultural land and became farmers. But most of the people who came to Dharamsala started off as labourers. But with the gradual tourism boom<sup>12</sup>, they have become successful entrepreneurs and have set up their small restaurants, shops, hotels etc.

### **Business practices and occupations**

A good deal of shift has taken place across the traditional system of occupational specialization. Category wise, a majority of the elite (nearly 70%) still clings to administrative services and the rest of them are engaged in business and trade. The monks of the former days show the highest degree of change, since some of them have renounced their monkhood and taken to different secular vocations. Many of them as stated before, are also engaged in business and trade. In the total Tibetan refugee context, one can observe that quite a significant number of Tibetans have taken to cottage industry and household manufacture (largely woolen garments and carpets) and have been pursuing the line with commendable expertise and organizational skill. The sale of handwoven Tibetan carpets has shown a steady upward trend and is in great demand all over the world.

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The tourism boom will be dealt in the next chapter.



Many farmer agriculturists have been absorbed in petty trade. Hawking and peddling of Tibetan products is popular. Such business has been expanded and extended many fold by the enterprising refugees. The business is carried on not only by hawking but by establishing temporary stalls at street crossings and other vantage points and sometimes even hiring shops for better display and drawing a larger number of customers.<sup>13</sup>

The wollen clothes and carpets apart, the Tibetans have also a reputation of selling genuine heeng, shilajit and Kasturi, which are all well-known Tibetan products widely used for medicinal purposes. The Tibetan refugee traders have already become well known in the Indian market as the dealers in the above products. Pictorial displays of the typical Tibetan motif, Tibetan *thangkas* (Tibetan religious scrolls) and many other items of Tibetan handicraft have also caught fancy of the Indian and foreign tourist purchasers.

Catering and running of restaurants are also popular trades among the Tibetan refugees. Such establishments have become a very popular business. The Tibetan restaurants are quite popular and much resorted for their Tibetan and Chinese cuisine<sup>14</sup>. The eating houses, in many cases in temporary sheds or

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<sup>13</sup> Jayanti Alam- *Tibetan Society in Exile*. (2001) Balbir Publishers, New Delhi, 2pg.45  
<sup>14</sup> T.C. Palakshappa – *Tibetans in India: A case study of the Mungeod Tibetans*, (1984) Sterling publishers, New Delhi, pg. 34.

tents, supply not only the Tibetan and Chinese delicacies such as momo, thukpa, various varieties of noodle dishes, but also the Tibetan brew called *chaang*.

Tibetan womenfolk are also employed in these establishments, pursuing the work in the normal way. It is surprising to see a significant number of shops run by ladies. If one roams across the streets of Dharamsala, it is common sight to see these Tibetan ladies in all kinds of shops, right from an emporium to a coffee shop.

## **Education**

The level of education among the Tibetan community in exile has been an area of concern for the community as a whole. The key issues in this sector involve the medium of language, Tibetan arts etc. On one hand the CTSA or the Central Tibetan School Administration wants to promote the Tibetan language among the young but on the other hand knowledge of English is essential for furthering the cause of employment of the huge number of unemployed. It is also a reality that not much can be achieved in the field of medicine and engineering if Tibetan language is the medium of instruction. Consequently a healthy debate is continuing to decide the path for such technical education of the large Tibetan

community. Scholars like Thondup Tsering and Robert L. Sinclair have suggested an overhauling of the education system in their research papers.<sup>15</sup> They have envisaged the cause of 'education for Tibetans by Tibetans' and linking employment and education.

Tibetan policy-makers have given top priority to the schooling of the younger generation to achieve several inter-related aims, for example, the aims of insuring the continued viability of Tibetan culture, Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and the current exigencies of life in India today.

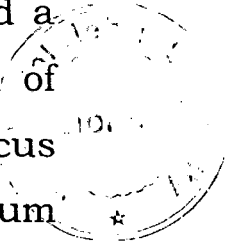
As for the wide variety of subjects taught in Tibetan Schools, Tibetans themselves have recognized a need to "modernize education with the introduction of scientific subjects and humanities". It puts special focus on calligraphy and reading to a diversified curriculum that values western science. "There is an extraordinary pragmatism, which might seem to be completely at variance with the mystical and philosophical pre-occupations of their religious life".<sup>16</sup>

Tibetan educational system aims at preserving and promoting Tibetan culture and tradition. Tibetan tradition, which has kept intact the essential teachings of Lord Buddha, can be of benefit not only to Tibetans but

<sup>15</sup> Thondup Tsering and Robert L. Sinclair- Improving Tibetan Education in Exile, *Tibetan Review*, 34(5), 1999, May, pg. 16-19

<sup>16</sup> *Tibetans in Exile (1959-80)*, Information Office, Central Tibetan Secretariat, Dharamsala, 1981, Pg.228.

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to the whole world as well. The traditional aspect of this learning in the Tibetan school tended to enthuse them into social, cultural and at times political activity in their after school years. They served as worthy ambassadors of the community.<sup>17</sup>

Kelsang Wangmo, a student of Buddhist Studies, working with an NGO, is one such individual, who is looking for Tibetan cultural practices in the high-altitude region societies of Himalayas (for example Lahual Spiti areas of Himachal Pradesh). A student of TCV(Tibetan Children's Village) at Dharamsala, she told us that, Tibetan culture is a very important part of the curriculum. While emphasizing the importance of Tibetan culture, she stressed a lot on the importance of English language to better the career prospects.<sup>18</sup>

The Dalai Lama opened many schools for orphans and Tibetan Children to provide them best educational facilities. The Tibetan's Children Village (TCV) is one such initiative. TCV's have been opened across India in Tibetan refugee settlements. Special Central Schools for the Tibetans have also been set up by the Government of

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<sup>17</sup> *Tibetans in Exile (1959-80)*, Information Office, Central Tibetan Secretariat, Dharamsala, 1981, pg.228.

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

India to take care of the educational needs of the Tibetan students.

People from different countries sponsor children to receive education. Tashi, an engineer told us that an American national, who saw him playing in the streets of Dharamsala 20 years back, sponsored his education. He said there are many of his friends whose education has been sponsored by foreign nationals.<sup>19</sup>

There are now eighty-two schools for Tibetan children in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Of these thirty are under the Central Tibetan Administration supported by the Government of India. The TCV houses, educates, feeds and clothes about 8000 refugee children, nearly 2000 of them in Dharamsala, many of them orphans, or brought to India by parents who, for the sake of their other children, must immediately return to Tibet.<sup>20</sup>

One of the greatest problems now facing the education sector is that there are very few opportunities for Tibetan refugees graduating from schools to go for further education. Thus many children leaving school have no opportunity to continue in higher education or vocational training that would give them the necessary skills to find a productive job. However, due to the lack of meaningful and challenging projects in the settlements

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala

<sup>20</sup> Mary Craig- *Tears of Blood: A cry for Tibet*, (1992) Harper Collins, Britain, pg.326.

the community cannot fully absorb those who do graduate from colleges or technical institutions. As a result many of these graduates are compelled to look for work outside the community.

Higher education for the exiles presents a pursuing problem. Some young Tibetans do go on to college and university, but more would do so if they could afford to. The opportunities are limited, college fees are high and scholarships are few and far between. Then too, even those who have been lucky in this respect find it difficult to get jobs afterwards<sup>21</sup>.

Some of the shortcomings in the programmes for the educational upliftment of the Tibetan youth in India are too glaring and serious to be ignored. Seen through democratic norms the snags are indeed very obvious. The education system for the Tibetans is characterized by an elitist perspective. It has been devised with the aim of building trained manpower for a modern 'free Tibet', which is nowhere in the picture. Educational planning cannot be done on such a hypothetical basis. In such a circumstance it is no wonder that education has become a major source of

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<sup>21</sup> Nyima Dhondup Palkhang – Worrying trends in exile Tibetan Education, *Tibetan Review*, 37(8), 2002, August. pg. 16.

frustration for the new, upcoming bourgeoising Tibetan youth.<sup>22</sup>

Until now the educated Tibetan youth have been absorbed in the Dalai Lama's establishments and in the various refugee settlements in managerial positions. But this cannot go on indefinitely. In fact the Tibetan bureaucracy in India proliferated very fast by accommodating the Tibetans educated in India and abroad. The number of students going for higher studies has gradually increased. More and more graduates are leaving the portals of universities every year. The community has already started facing unemployment problem. Though the problem does not seem to be acute as yet, it has already had an upsetting effect upon the community. The demand is coming up that the liberal educational pattern should be changed in favour of job-oriented training.

Nevertheless, the Tibetan educational system prevailing in India has tremendous effects. The present system has given birth to a new young generation, who are educated and trained. They are the backbone of the government in exile, and have occupied an important position in every walk of exile life.

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<sup>22</sup> Girija Saklani- *The uprooted Tibetans*(1984) Cosmo publications, New Delhi, pg.335

## **Employment**

Apart from the well-run businesses of the refugees, there is a sizable population of educated people looking for jobs. As the website [www.tibet.com](http://www.tibet.com) says:

“Hidden behind the façade of multilayered prayer flags and thangkas lies a truth few tourists are willing to acknowledge. The unemployment rate among young Tibetans is around twenty five percent, perhaps more... Those lucky enough to be employed are working dead end jobs in kitchens and guesthouses, feeding the frenzy of tourists that visit the place every year.”<sup>23</sup>

Employment is a major problem among the Tibetan community. Due to the high illiteracy rate among Tibetans, the problem of unemployment among young Tibetans is persistently high and running at 20 percent in the age bracket of 16-25. As a result, large numbers of educated youths are leaving the settlements in search of work outside. Moreover, it has been observed that in recent years, due to unemployment problem in settlements the Tibetans have preferred to live in scattered camps as employment prospects are better there than in the settlements. In the process, they do get accommodated wherever it is possible; in particular the business of selling sweaters attracts them, so we can see

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<sup>23</sup> [www.tibet.com](http://www.tibet.com)



large number of Tibetan refugees in this business.<sup>24</sup> In this way, due to economic survival being at stake, many young and able bodied Tibetans have left the settlements and are living in unhygienic and crowded scattered camps at the cost of abandoning their children, the old people and the cultivation of the land.

### **Youth**

The Tibetan youth born in India know very less about their homeland. They converse in Indian languages and have modern tastes. They know very less about Tibetan culture and arts. The Tibetans who came to India, as refugees are concerned about the youth's lack of affinity towards their homeland.

The younger generation listens to the tales of woes and agony of their fathers and grandfathers who cherished a dream to preserve a civilization beyond its geo-political boundary against all odds. But the new generation is hardly able to associate itself to its geo-political background. For them, Tibet of the past is like a fairy land which is beyond their access.

Everywhere the problem of the young is acute. Young Tibetans in Dharamsala are growing up in a quite different culture from their parents. They wear jeans and sweat shirts, they like pop music and fast food. Chhering,

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<sup>24</sup> Peter J.Karthak- A personal look at the Tibetans in Exile, *Tibetan Review*, Vol. 36(9), September 1991.

an old shopkeeper in Dharamsala, believes that the greatest problem facing the refugees is how to integrate the young into Tibetan traditional values, how to convince them that Tibetan culture is worth saving.<sup>25</sup>

The majority of the upcoming Tibetan youth exhibit a very pronounced western influence. Most of them have been educated in the public school type institutions located in Indian hill-stations like Mussorie, Darjeeling, Simla, Dalhousie, Kalimpong, Mt. Abu etc., which have a stronger anglicized tradition than the more interior towns and cities. The western influence upon the Tibetan youth is not limited to dress-styles only. They also show a distinct liking for the western music, language and way of life.

What has most upset the Tibetans of the older generation is the rapidly increasing love for the western life-style among their educated Tibetan youth. Exposed to the situation in the Indian urban areas, a situation which is totally different from that of traditional Tibet, the Tibetan youth have been strongly attracted by certain typically 'mod' styles. For instance, many of them have discarded the customary Tibetan clothes (*chuba*) in favour of western clothes. They show more interest in popular western music than their national music. They talk more about the desperadoes shown in

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<sup>25</sup> interview at Dharamsala.

American and even in Indian films than about their own national heroes. Their learning English has made them very avid readers of the cheap English thrillers<sup>26</sup>.

The elders view these aspects as very undesirable symptoms, even though the exotic influence upon the Tibetan youths has been more or less skin deep so far. They are afraid that if this process continues the Tibetan youth will be completely weaned away from their national culture and become nondescripts without cultural moorings anywhere. And it will be alarming for the cause of the future Tibet of their dream if the Tibetan youth choose to forget all the sufferings and sacrifices that their elders made for the paramount cause of saving the traditional Tibetan cultural and religious heritage. The opposition of the elders to westernizing youth has not been very vocal so far. But the gap is perceptibly increasing and in future it may foment a crisis in human relationship among the Tibetan refugees.

There are problems with the educated young as well. When young people have been through the education system, they don't want just to work in the fields like their parents. They want a white-collar job, but they can't find any in the settlements. A few of them find work in the offices of the cooperative; some of them go off to sell sweaters.

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<sup>26</sup> Frank Goodwerth – The Tibetan Youth, *Tibetan Review*, October 1987.

Drug abuse is rampant among younger exiles. Relief workers note that, after years of living under Chinese system, recent arrivals are disconnected from their traditional Buddhist beliefs and values. They are very naughty and they fight a lot. They are very short-tempered take to knives, causing lots of injuries over minor things. There have been plenty of cases of violence involving Tibetan youth. Some of them have even been involved in chain snatching, petty theft etc.

After leaving school, young Tibetans find themselves alone in India, where nearly 400 million people live below the poverty line and jobs are scarce. They may have come to escape the Chinese, but because of their Mongolian features, many end up being hired cooks and waiters to give a semblance of authenticity to Chinese restaurants in Delhi and Bombay. Another option is to serve a cheap labour for earlier, better off Tibetan settlers, who have established their businesses. Despite the hardships the exiles have endured, the Dalai Lama is now urging them to return. New refugees between the ages of 18 and 30 are given basic lessons in Tibetan and English at a tin-roofed transit camp near Dharamsala and then told to go home and work with countrymen.

All young Tibetans fantasize about escaping to the West with a foreign passport. They want to go around with Europeans and marry them to leave Dharamsala. As

Norbu tells us: “All my friends and family are in Tibet, and all my yak and sheep, but I will like Europe for sure. I want to live in a big city, because I have never been to a big city , and I have never been to school”. He continues with his story: “When I was in Tibet it was so boring, I wanted to leave. But when I got there, it was so noisy and dusty and polluted, I could not stay here. I worked as a waiter in a restaurant, but it was only 500 rupees a month so I quit.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus as a demoralized younger generation of Tibetans is getting more and more restive and frustrated, they have been compelled to explore possibilities of a bright future for themselves and their families, for which they are looking towards the West or engaging in anti social activities like drug and alcohol abuse and even drug trafficking.

### **Stress of influx and intra-refugee tensions**

There has been a glaring increase in the un-registered refugees coming to Mcleodganj from Tibet in the recent past. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile has reportedly hid the antecedents of most of these Tibetans even if they get involved in criminal acts. According to sources, there is normally a floating population of around 500 to 600 un-registered Tibetan refugees at a time in

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<sup>27</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

Dharamsala.<sup>28</sup> The escapees from Tibet reach the Dalai Lama's settlement through the Nepal route. Though there has been much of restraint on them by the Nepalese police at the Tibet border, of late, many of them arrange entry into Indian territory and then Dharamsala without any verification owing to laxity on the part of the border authorities. The Tibetan refugees come to India in greater numbers now following increased Chinese repression.

Apart from Chinese persecution, the destruction of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in China, compelled many Tibetan Monks to come to India for religious education, to study Buddhism, Tibetan scriptures and cultural ethics, which is being denied in China. Despite increasing number of births in exilic Tibetan community there is constant flow of new Tibetan refugees from China since 1980, when travel restrictions from Tibet become more relaxed. Moreover, the free environment, freedom to practice democratic rights, education, medical facilities, attract Tibetans to escape to India. Although many of them say that they have come to India to have an audience with His Holiness Dalai Lama and seek his blessings for their life and will return to Tibet very soon. In reality hardly any one goes back to Tibet due to the prevailing unhappy situation in Tibet. Even, the representatives of His Holiness Dalai Lama are restless

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<sup>28</sup> *The Indian Express*- Chandigarh edition, Sunday, December 21, 1997.

with this attitude of Tibetan refugees as it endures the problem of repatriation. India provides stop-gap arrangements to them if they wish to go abroad. India provides the basic needs of Tibetans, mainly shelter and opportunity of economic livelihood. Hence, maximum number of Tibetan refugees living in India have been accommodated in various settlements with different rehabilitation sectors. As a result of the above mentioned factors, every month almost a few hundred of new Tibetan refugees seek asylum in India. Hence, the actual number of Tibetan refugees in India might be double than the registered ones, as many Tibetans who escape from Tibet do not register themselves with the reception center and prefer to live in unscattered camps or independently.<sup>29</sup>

Not only has this influx created problems for the Indian authorities but has also created problems for the already settled Tibetans. As the Tibetans, who came to India years back, have taken to this modernized world, they are not able to mingle with the Tibetans, who have just come from China. The 'Indianised' Tibetans have some sort of antipathy for the recent migrants. Although most Tibetans at Dharamsala, donate goods and money for the welfare of these people but this antipathy is also a reality. As an article on Tibetinfo.net tells:

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<sup>29</sup> *The Indian Express*. Chandigarh edition, 21 July 1999.

“The dirty secret of the diaspora is that Tibetan newcomers and old timers are at each other’s throats. Despite the popular stereotype of Tibetans as pacifists in the mould of the Dalai Lama, longtime residents barely conceal their antipathy for their newly arrived brethren from across the border.”<sup>30</sup>

This fact also became evident in the personal interviews with long- settled refugees and the new comers. Even the Tibetans working in the Government-in-Exile, accept this disparity between the new comers and the old residents of Dharamsala. As Tashi Yankit, a government employee put it:

“We have grown up in India and we are well educated. They don’t behave in a civilized way. We are the same people, but with different attitudes. We are attached to Western culture, and they are more Chinese.”<sup>31</sup>

Even Dawa Norbu has mentioned this in his writings, “...the foreigners treated and nursed us like real parents, without a patronizing air or any sign of revulsion at our unhealthy state; whereas our own kin, the sons and daughters of Tibetan aristocrats and wealthy Tibetans, studying in colleges or working around Darjeeling, did not come to help us. Perhaps they were ashamed of us.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Article in [www.tibetinfo.net](http://www.tibetinfo.net).

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview in Dharamsala.

<sup>32</sup> Dawa Norbu – *Red Star over Tibet*,(1978) Harper Collins, New Delhi,pg.246.



There are tensions elsewhere also. The Tibetan refugees are, legally speaking, foreigners in India and they are required to register themselves under the Registration of Foreigners' Act, 1946. As yet there is no clear policy about the citizenship question of the Tibetan refugees. The Dalai Lama's Administration, for obvious political reasons is still in favour of the Tibetans' retaining their 'national' identity. Though the Administration has not officially declared that no Tibetan that no Tibetan should seek Indian citizenship, there were some specific incidents when enormous preventive pressure was exerted on Tibetans who had raised the cry that the Tibetan refugees should seek Indian citizenship.

It is now a known fact that there is a group among the Tibetans, which is in favour of accepting Indian citizenship. There have been instance of muscle pressure on some members of this group as the Dalai Lama is not in favour of securing Indian citizenship. The supporters of the Dalai Lama often get into heated debates with these pragmatists.

### **Culture preservation**

The Sinification of Tibet by China has led to unrest among the exiled community over the extinction of Tibetan culture and arts. Although, they have

modernized or adapted to the culture of the new land, they have their zest of preserving their identity and their way of living.

The Dalai Lama decided to accommodate the cultural component by establishing monasteries in almost each and every Tibetan settlement. For instance, in Dharamsala, at upper Mcleodganj as well as in lower Mcleodganj, the buildings of the Tibetan Parliament in exile, the Library of Tibetan works and the Archives are marked with detailed paintings of Tibetan art and architectural features. A separate institute has been set up to train young Tibetans in different fields of traditional culture known as the Norbulingka institute of Tibetan culture at Siddhapura in Dharamsala. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts has also been set up with the same objective in mind. The practice of religious and cultural tradition and ceremonies has largely been entrusted to those who were born in Tibet and known for their dedication to Tibet prior to their making the journey into exile.

The institutionalized expression of the theme of preservation of culture is best found at the Norbulingka Institute, dedicated explicitly to the preservation of Tibetan culture in both literary and artistic forms. Activities and publications of the Institute expressly represent a unique ancient culture that needs

to be preserved from possible extinction. For instance, in the Norbulingka's Centre for Arts, the skills preserved and passed on through training and apprenticeship include statue making, thangka painting, appliqué and tailoring, woodcarving, carpentry and metal craft. It is emphasized that the practice of making traditional works of art such as religious statues and *thangkas* only in response to the customers order is a continuation of earlier practices where patrons would personally commission artists to do such work<sup>33</sup>.

Artists and masons trained in Tibet have been encouraged to continue their professions. Some good painters have also been patronized. There are some, who are on the payroll of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. They are the ones who go out to work from Dharamsala, and do the artistic work in buildings of various settlements across India, in pure Tibetan traditions. *Thangka* painters have specially been patronized for such jobs.

But despite all these efforts to preserve culture, consumerism has propped up and culture exists only in the name of tourism. All culture, which is liked by tourists and is saleable, is adhered to, while the rest is left to the old generation. Culture has become a consumer product here and exists only in name.

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<sup>33</sup> John Gray- *Tibetan art*(1998) Kalinga publications, New Delhi, pg. 124.

Thus, in Dharamsala's narrow, overcrowded, unpaved streets, the enterprising Tibetans have built houses, small ramshackle hotels, cafes and teahouses. There are lively market-stalls offering trinkets, costume jewellery, ancient Tibetan artifacts, tee shirts, Indian skirts, dayglo socks and Reebok trainers. There are handicraft centers selling Tibetan rugs, *thangkas*, sweaters; there are taxis, travel agencies, a post office and some bookshops<sup>34</sup>. There are homes for the elderly and the new refugees, while at the Tibetan Medical and Astrology Institute traditional Tibetan medicine is available for those who prefer it. And among all this the Tibetans carry on their social and economic life which is inherent with complexities of the young and old, employment and education, preservation of culture, intra refuge tensions and much more.

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<sup>34</sup> Dharamsala: Mini Tibet, *The Tribune*, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1995.

**Chapter 3**

**IMPACT OF TIBETANS ON**  
**DHARAMSALA'S SOCIETY AND**  
**ECONOMY: THE DALAI LAMA/**  
**TIBETAN FACTOR**

**Chapter 3**  
**IMPACT OF TIBETANS ON DHARAMSALA'S SOCIETY**  
**AND ECONOMY: THE DALAI LAMA/ TIBETAN**  
**FACTOR**

The Dalai Lama's thought of exiled society took root in an entirely new headquarters, an abandoned British hill station called Dharamsala, located a day west of Delhi on the northern margin of the then Punjab. As the Dalai Lama has written in his autobiography, "I lived in Mussoorie for a year, until the Indian government offered me a bungalow, which I could use as long as was necessary, at a place called Dharamsala in the extreme north west of India"<sup>35</sup>. An elevated place across the lower ridges of the Dhauladhar Range, a plumb barrier of snowcapped peaks fencing in the Kangra valley. Dharamsala had been established by the British in the early 1860's as the summer seat of the Jullundur division. Starting with a military cantonment, they had gone on to found a small town, called Mcleodganj, on a almost negligible ridge facing the plains below.<sup>36</sup> Mcleodganj was named so after the Lt. Governor of Punjab Lord Mcleod.

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<sup>35</sup> Dalai Lama- *My land my people*(1962) Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, pg.196.

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Giriraj Shah- *Tibet: The Himalyan Region*(2003) Kalpaz publications, New Delhi, pg.167.

A row of columns was erected to house shops, fronted by an elegant park of cedar trees, a birdbath and stone benches. Down the hill rose the rusticated belfry of St. John's in the wilderness, an Anglican church, while, scattered well apart over the slopes, more than a hundred bungalows established sporting small tower on buildings and gingerbread woodwork, vaulted ceilings and multiple wings, and dubbed with a flock of romantic names such as Ivanhoe, Eagle's nest, Chestnut Villa, Wargrove and the Retreat.

By the turn of the century, Mcleodganj supported one of the most vigorous societies, outside the cities, of any in the Raj. With the rail line put through to Pathankot, seven miles from the foothills, bureaucrats from both Delhi as well as Lahore flocked to the mountains.

Slated to become the summer capital of the Raj, Dharamsala's future seemed secure until an earthquake struck in 1905. The British picked Shimla and those local officials who remained relocated their offices 1500 feet down the hillside to the less exposed Lower Dharamsala. Even they departed when India became independent in 1947.

Only one man remained to preside over the unreal life of Mcleodganj: N.N.Nowrojee. As proprietors of a general merchandise " Oilman" or " Europe Store" as they were

called, the Nowrojee family had lived in Dharamsala since its start. The family line had remained intact there since a long time and, with the founding of their own business in Mcleodganj. Entrusted now with dozens of left over bungalows, N.N.Nowrojee, fifth proprietor of Nowrojee and sons, did not succeed to bring the village back to life. For twelve years, he offered the buildings free of charge to schools and as tourist lodges to the state government but there was no one to take.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, on hearing through friends about the Central Government's hunt for a permanent residence for the Dalai Lama, he approached New Delhi directly. As N.N.Nowrojee has stated, "In late 1959, when I got to know through some sources that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was looking for an alternative residence as Mussoorie was not suitable – proximity to the border, etc- immediately contacted the central and district administrations and asked the central government to give Dharamsala as headquarters to His Holiness".<sup>38</sup>The government found the place as ideal. Later, although with initial apprehensions, the Tibetans also decided to shift to Mcleodganj, which was going to become their home for years to come.

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<sup>37</sup> Dr. Giriraj Shah- *Tibet: The Himalyan Region*(2003) Kalpaz publications, New Delhi, pg.168.

<sup>38</sup> *Tibetan Bulletin*, Vol.2, Issue 1, January- February 1998. pg.15



The Dharmasala of 1960's and that of 2004, forms a tremendous contrast. From a sleepy town to a highly cosmopolitan town and from a town which could not be located in Himachal, to a town which is now on the world map. It is a story of great change and associating this change to the influx of Dalai Lama and the Tibetans should not be wrong. Dharamsala climbed up the ladder of importance as soon as the Dalai Lama and the refugees reached here. It has been a great transformation and it is this transformation which this chapter seeks to study.

### **Evolution as 'Little Lhasa'**

Before delving into the transformation of Dharamsala, it should be pointed out that the place that is commonly designated as the 'Little Lhasa' is actually Mcleodganj. The Dharamsala town is at a lower altitude from Mcleodganj and is mainly populated of local Indians(Himachalis), whereas Mcleodganj constitutes the place where the Dalai Lama resides and the Tibetan refugees live in a bunch. The government-in-exile promotes the name Dharamsala, and not Mcleodganj, as the 'Little Lhasa'. This may be because Tibetan institutions and establishments are spread throughout the vicinity of Dharamsala.

The Dalai Lama's entry into Dharamsala made it a holy place at once and together with the lot of Tibetans from Lhasa(Tibet) gave it even more charisma. It is thus not surprising that Dharamsala is projected as the 'Little Lhasa' in India and several dynamics support such a depiction<sup>39</sup>. Not only is this the residence of Dalai Lama and (therefore) a place of pilgrimage for many Tibetans and non-Tibetan Buddhists, but it is also the center of focus for the individual, communal and institutional practices of Tibetan culture.

Earlier pilgrims used to visit Lhasa, which for them was a source of refuge from the everydayness of life with hope of good in the next life. Now refugee status is itself often seen as a sort of pilgrimage during which a *darshan*(sight) of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala provides compensation for hardship. This is their place of once- in- a- lifetime pilgrimage.

Thus, the projection of Dharamsala as the Little Lhasa brought many Tibetans out here and also many Buddhists. This projection also provided legitimacy to the claim that the Central Tibetan Administration is a Government-in-Exile, a continuation of the pre-1959 Lhasa government, and therefore the rightful representative of all Tibetan people. It provided added

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<sup>39</sup> Henry Kamm – Little Lhasa in Exile, *Tibetan Review*, October 1976.

validation to the political struggle for self-determination in Tibet.

Dharamsala is perceived as the temporary capital of the entire Tibetan world and the Tibet movement. Conscious efforts have been made to recapture what has been called the spirit of 'Old Tibet' by recreating in Dharamsala, for instance, Tsuglakhang(Central Cathedral) as an equivalent of Lhasa's Jokhang temple. The symbolic representation of Dharmasala as Little Lhasa, as Thupten Samphel of the Government-in-Exile's Department for Information and International Relations (DIIR) pointed out,<sup>40</sup> is to convey that what has been destroyed is being recreated.

Remembering Dharamsala as a resemblance of Lhasa was one major theme, which made it popular for the Tibetan refugees and for other Buddhists. Due to the 'Dalai Lama factor', all refugees first come to Dharamsala, see Dalai Lama and are then sent to various refugee settlements around the country.

### **Promotion of the 'Tibet issue'**

As the Tibet issue was raised at the UN and other international forums, the Europeans interested in the spiritual and the religious life of the Tibetan nomads got interested in their affairs. It started off with

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<sup>40</sup> Personal interview in Dharamsala.

Europeans and now people from around the world visit Dharamsala to have a look at the life of the Tibetan Buddhists and more importantly to see the Dalai Lama.

For the town, the graph was like that of AC current graph. When the Tibetans reached here in hordes, they initially found it problematic. As the town didn't have the facilities to accommodate such a huge mass of refugees, there was pressure on the resources. Many Tibetans initially worked with Indian shops and businesses in Lower Dharamsala to earn a living. They somehow tried to make ends meet by working in every possible unskilled job.

But with the promotion of the Tibet issue, the tourism dragon rose its head in Dharamsala. The destiny of the Tibetans changed and so did the destiny of the town. Slowly and steadily, tourists started trickling in this small village. The Tibetans gradually realized the West's interest in Tibet and the Dalai Lama. Initially, they gave the west what it ordered, but with the passage of time, business skills have been honed up and now they sell everything, which smells Tibet.

It was stated by many residents of Dharamsala that after the English had left India and the army encampments of the place had been wound up, the town had become considerably crestfallen. But after the coming in of Tibetans and the Dalai Lama, despite few

initial hitches, the town sprang up to a new culture of tourism and cosmopolitanism.

### **Tourism boom**

The effect of commodification and tourism on Dharamsala is pretty evident. The desire to attract tourists has played a significant role in the depiction of Dharmasala as the 'Little Lhasa'. The residents give the tourists, what they are looking for in the town- a touch of Tibet.

The names of most establishments in Mcleodganj, particularly the commercial ones, highlight the importance of tourism and the desire to appeal to outsiders' idea of Tibet as a Shangrila. One can find it in a small walk around the town. It is exemplified in names such as Yak restaurant, Snow Lion Restaurant, Hotel Shangrila, Snow Land Complex (Hotel, restaurant, medical store) and Travel Tibet tailoring shop.

The fact that many of such establishments are owned by local Indians goes on to show that a primary motive for such naming practices is to appeal to tourists. In fact, this dynamic is also underlined by the presence of other shapes with names that are unabashedly orientalist, such as Dreaming Oriental Carpet Cottage Handicrafts, Royal Asia Art and the Rising Horizon Café.

It is hard to imagine the old city of Lhasa having places names such as Shangri-la, Dreaming Oriental or Yeti before its incorporation into international tourism networks. While Tibetan names such as Amnye Machen Institute, Gangchen Kyishog and Ilhagyal-ri reflect a desire to recreate a familiar environment, other more orientalist names such as Shangri-la and Travel Tibet pander to exoticised representations of Tibet. This is supported by the fact that while the former are predominantly used in Tibetan government and non-government institutes, the latter are found exclusively in commercial establishments.

### **Effect of tourism on economy and society**

The tourism boom has had a very strong effect on the economy and society of the town. Tourism anyway has an effect on the economy in terms of the services provided to the tourists, but it also affects the society in terms of consumerism, money mindedness, preferences, choices etc.

Today Mcleodganj has so many hotels that it can accommodate more number of tourists, than the number of refugees coming in. Whatever houses the refugees had, have been converted into guesthouses and hotels. As Mr. Sonam, the proprietor of Hotel Tibet View, told us that he

has made a hotel on the ground floors of his houses and himself stays on the top floor of the hotel.<sup>41</sup>

Young Tibetan boys, whose parents are not affluent enough to own hotels, drive taxis and take the tourists around. One can find many youngsters at the taxi stand taking around in cabs. Some have even formed small shops and call themselves tour operators for local sight seeing. There are many others who work as guides and also work as contractors for local hotels. They identify potential customers and take them to the hotel, which patronize them.

No doubt the tourist influx has given local Tibetans, a platform of opportunities to earn money. And not only are the Tibetans earning money, but the local Indians (Himachalis) have also benefited from their tourism. Most hotels in Lower Dharamsala are owned by Himachalis and they have even managed to get hold of some hotels in Mcleodganj.

The sleepy little town now bustles with cars, jeeps and foreigners. Foreigners walk around the streets, giving the town a cosmopolitan look. One can find cyber cafes around every corner and every second shop proclaims to be an authentic money exchanger. All tourists yearn to have a glimpse of the Dalai Lama. They even pay money to local Tibetans to get a closer look at him. Tibetans sell

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<sup>41</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

petty 'Tibet products' on the pavements and tourists are happy buying a small keychain of Buddha. Mcleodganj has really become a tourist place, especially with the new interest among domestic tourists to know what the 'Little Lhasa' is all about.

The changes in terms of the society are immense. Firstly, the Tibetan refugees have felt it, that they are needed in the world. Most of the refugees in this world are an unwanted lot and nobody cares for them (seriously) or has interest in them. Tibetans are the most privileged refugees in the world to be respected everywhere and by everyone. Now, the Tibetans know that they are wanted and they also know what they are wanted for.

Hence, the whole stress of the Tibetans is on projecting their 'Tibetanness' (and only that part, which is liked by the conventional European tourist). This may include wearing beads, shaving heads, wearing Buddha t-shirts etc. So, the Tibetans elite keep touch with their culture and patronize western music and clothes on the other hand. The new generation knows the culture only to the extent of giving a lecture to a foreigner on the issue.

They don't want to identify or become amalgamated with the Indians (they don't revere Indians) and hence look to the west for giving them new ideas on fashion, friendship and life. As already discussed in the previous



chapter, many young Tibetans have the ambition to marry a westerner and push off to a foreign country. This attitude has propped up due to the huge accessibility to foreigners, who come to Dharamsala to take a deeper look at the Tibetan way of life. As many among these foreigners belong to the *bam-bhole* gang (people who smoke marijuana), the local Tibetans have also got in this habit. There are some cases of young Tibetans even joining drug mafias and working for European bosses.

This tourist influx and the influx of western culture is not exclusive to Tibetans but has managed to affect the local Indian population as well. English music, drugs and hippy lifestyle is in fad in Dharamsala among the local youth. As compared to other towns in Himachal, the Dharamsala youth are pretty aware of the latest English music and even sport Buddha t-shirts *a la* European tourists. Dharamsala is the first town in Himachal to have a disco and interestingly it is located in lower Dharamsala, a predominantly Indian resident area. All these facts point towards the change even in the Indian society due to the tourism boom in Dharamsala.

Dharamsala has come to acquire multiple layers of not always harmonious meaning is, therefore, not surprising. While for some (the Tibetan refugees) it is a place of refuge from oppression, for others (the Chinese government) it is a center of seditious activities. For some (for Tibetans and

Indians) it is a vital opportunity for material advancement, for others (many Western tourists) it is a spiritual refuge from the crass materialism of modern Western societies. For some (the Tibetans as well as non-Tibetan Buddhists) it is a center of pilgrimage, for others (many Indian tourists) it is merely a site of curiosity<sup>42</sup>.

Representations especially the Western ones have had significant impact on the symbolic geography of Dharamsala and Tibetan identity discourses. The desire to secure patronage from sympathetic outsiders, elicit support for the Tibetan political cause, and make a living through commercial processes- all these forces have contributed to a self- reflexive adaptation of Western representations of Tibetans as a part of Tibetanness. Image has been translated into identity. The representation of Tibetans as inherently religious and spiritual has certainly contributed to the mushrooming of yoga classes, Retreat centers and Meditation Schools of Dharamsala.

At the same time we must keep in mind the fact that the Tibetan exiles are not unique that Western representations have a major effect on identity practices. As Toni Huber argues<sup>43</sup>, recent reflexive notions of Tibetan culture and identity witnessed in exile should be

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<sup>42</sup> Dibyesh Anand – A guide to little Lhasa in India, in P.C. Klieger(ed.) *Tibet, self, and the Tibetan diaspora: voices of difference*(2002) Brill Academic, Leiden, pg.15

understood as products of a complex transnational politics of identity within which populations such as the Tibetan exiles are increasingly representing themselves and being represented by others. One such identity discourse, which Huber highlights is connected to environmentalism. The presence within Dharamsala of Green Hotel and Green Cyber Café, Vegetarian Health Food, and the like may be understood as a conscious desire to appropriate this particular discourse as a part of identity formation.

### **‘Dalai Lama Factor’**

An integral part of Dharamsala’s transformation is the crucial role played by the personality as well as the figure of the Dalai Lama. The first thing, which comes to mind, when one, hears the word, Dharamsala is- Dalai Lama. Such is the stature and aura of Dalai Lama that people from across the world come just to see him. He combines the role of the supreme leader of the entire Tibetan Buddhist community with the role of the chief spokesman of Buddhist modernism.

His smiling face adorns almost every establishment in Dharamsala, including the shops owned by non-Tibetans (Indians). More than anything else, it is his residence

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<sup>2</sup> Toni Huger – *Tibet*(1987) Oxford University Press, Delhi, pg. 45.

here that contributes to the transformation of Dharamsala into 'Little Lhasa'. He has a central position as the symbol of Tibet among Tibetan refugees and in the international media.

It is this charismatic factor (Dalai Lama factor), which is the key to the transformation of Dharamsala from a small town to one of the smallest cosmopolitan towns in the world. When the Dalai Lama is in Dharamsala, tourism is at full throttle. Tourists yearn to meet him. As we met Diana Wolf in Dharamsala, she said: " I have been waiting for the Dalai Lama for the last 9 days but he is out of the town. I'll leave for Paris once I have a glimpse of him."<sup>44</sup>

### **Stress on the town**

The increased number of people coming into Dharamsala of let's say Mcleodganj has taken its toll. Even if the tourists are a floating population, the refugees coming from across the border are definitely an added stress on the already strained town. As Mary Craig points out: "Dharamsala is beset by problems, not least that with the never ending influx of destitute refugees, there are acute shortages of water and electricity. Even in the better

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<sup>44</sup> Personal interview in Dharamsala.

accommodation, there is no heating for the bitter winters and running water is a rarity.”<sup>45</sup>

Not only is their stress on basic amenities but it is difficult to pack so many people in an area as small as Mcleodganj. This small area has everything from offices to shops, restaurants to rest houses, schools to monasteries and slums to homes. And thus, it has become an extremely polluted area amidst the jungle. As an Internet site says<sup>46</sup>

“For all its fame as ‘Little Lhasa’, Dharamsala is a dump. Garbage and manure litter the narrow alleys, which are clogged with jeeps and choked by pollution. Money changers compete with fortune tellers for tourist dollars”. It adds “This wasn’t what the Dalai Lama had in mind when he established his temporary residence in India in 1959, eight years after the Chinese Communists conquered neighbouring Tibet.”

The bookstores here, catering to a foreign crowd, are chock full of glossy coffee-table books depicting Tibetan life in exile. It is the spirit of a free Tibet, the authors say, flourishing in the face of oppression. The same authors idealizing a lifestyle so unique and intriguing to the Westerners, but barely touching on the precarious reality of life in this town.

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Craig- *Tears of Blood: A cry for Tibet*(1992) Harper Collins, Britain, pg.326

The popular Hollywood hero Richard Gere has formed the Gere Foundation, which perhaps concerned about the deterioration of the town has taken some steps to stop this pollution. The garbage trucks sponsored by the Gere foundation are a frequent sight in Dharamsala. There are some other Tibetan organizations, which are making efforts for the same cause. But these will prove fruitful only after many awareness sessions and when a tab is put on the population of the town.

As the population has increased and the designated area is the same, it was natural for the Tibetans to encroach on nearby land. As everyone has done the way he/she liked, Mcleodganj is now a haphazard town. With the Tibetan population burgeoning in Mcleodganj, the pressure on the land has increased. When Tibetan refugees started arriving here in 1960, the government gave land to the Tibetan Society for settling them. However, the Tibetans have now settled outside these earmarked areas and encroached much of forestland.

Many multi-storied buildings have sprung up on the forestland especially alongside the narrow roads leading to Bhagsu Nag, the Mountaineering Institute and the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA). These constructions, which took place during the past few years, have caused so much congestion that it is difficult

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<sup>46</sup> [www.tibetinfo.net](http://www.tibetinfo.net).

for heavy vehicles to ply on these steep and narrow roads.<sup>47</sup>

### **Larger impact on the region**

The 'success story' of Dharamsala has had a larger impact on the tourist sector in the whole of Himachal Pradesh. Although Himachalis have been entertaining foreign tourists in Kullu-Manali as well, but they learnt many things about the trade in Dharamsala. The whole idea of spiritual tourism, yoga and eco-tourism was understood by them in Dharamsala. The interests of foreigners in ethnic goods and the demand for Chinese, Tibetan and continental food made other hoteliers and tourism sector entrepreneurs to innovate their businesses to the interests of the foreigners.

After getting the experience in international ticketing and exposure to international tour operators, travel agents have opened their branches in other hill stations of Himachal Pradesh. Even the local guides and taxi-operators know how to tackle foreign tourists. Some have even gone to the extent of doing foreign language courses in German and French to better their business prospects<sup>48</sup>. As Tashi, a local driver stated: " I have done a course in French language from Shimla. It will help my

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<sup>47</sup> *The Tribune*, Chandigarh edition, 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> J.N. Sadhu – Miniature Lhasa in Himachal, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 28 August, 1991.

business, as the French tourists will prefer my taxi. They also have money.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, we find that Dharamsala has grown and matured as a town due to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan influx factor. This has had a profound effect on the economy and society of the area although the development has come with its usual baggage of pollution and stress on local resources.

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<sup>49</sup> Personal interview in Dharamsala.



# Chapter 4

TENSIONS AND

CLASHES

BETWEEN

INDIANS AND

TIBETANS

## Chapter 4

### TENSIONS AND CLASHES BETWEEN INDIANS AND TIBETANS

When the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans came to Dharamsala in 1960, they were welcomed with open hands and the locals helped them a lot in settling down, as did the Government of India. The old Tibetans still remember those days. As Norbu Tsering told us: “The local Himachalis provided us with ample wollen material to help us survive the cold of Dharamsala. They also helped us with food and utensils”<sup>50</sup>

But over the years as the Tibetans have settled down and their life has normalized, their relations have passed through several phases. Indians don't have that sympathy for refugees as they had earlier as the Tibetans don't have any problems of food, clothing, shelter etc. Now they don't interact as refugees and locals, but as neighbours living in the same town and carry out transactions.

As both communities belong to different ethnic groups, cultures and countries, a new relationship has been formed. It is very important to study this relationship; together with the perceptions or image the Tibetans have of Indians and vice-versa. To study this

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<sup>50</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

unique society completely, it is important to know the views of both the locals and the Tibetans regarding their experiences and reactions.

It would be appropriate to understand the relations in small packets such as personal relations, business relations, relations of Tibetans with the Government of India. With this approach, it will be easier to understand the points of exchange of ideas and thoughts within this society as a whole and the tensions and clashing emerging due to different stances.

### **Personal relations and tensions**

As far as personal relations are concerned, there is hardly any interaction between the local Indians and the Tibetans. It is due to the fact that they live in two different areas of the town, which are more or less separated from each other. Mcleodganj is totally Tibeto-Buddhist area, while lower Dharamsala is almost Indian with small patches of Tibetan population in between. Thus, these two communities remain in isolation and the interaction is primarily for trade. As the locals don't need things that the Tibetans sell, this interaction is also minimal. A large majority of Tibetans live a life closed within their settlements. Except for the traders and peddlers, among them, they hardly have any special social interactions with the local Indians.

Most of the Indians feel that Tibetans are arrogant in their trade practices. They do not like to do business transactions with Indians. Moreover, they do not entertain Indian customers in their shops and are more concerned about foreign tourists.

Only a small section of the Indian population has personal relations with Tibetans and that too mostly with the employees of the Tibetan government's offices. As these employees are mostly educated in India, they are able to relate to the Indians. The people engaged in business are however not educated outside Dharamsala, and maintain a distance from the local Indians. Mr. Raj Kanwar, a lawyer in the district courts at Dharamsala, said: "I have got many friends in the Tibetan offices. They interact freely with me and invite me to their parties. We are good friends and share everything. They even seek legal advise from me on many matters."<sup>51</sup> He added "But the Tibetan businessmen are a different affair. They only mean business and nothing else." Similarly, Norbu, secretary in the Department of International Relations also said: "I have many Indian friends and we interact freely."

As most Tibetans do not like interacting with Indians, the personal relations are minimal and as such they frown on each other. Hence, even the Indians have

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<sup>51</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

started keeping an apathy for the Tibetans because of their arrogant behaviour.

Another important feature of social relations is the dominant nature of Tibetans towards the Himachali Buddhists. In the Buddhist areas of Himachal Pradesh (Lahaul and Spiti districts), the Tibetans denigrate the local Buddhist monks and claim their superiority in religious matters. They are now trying to impose Tibetan Buddhist rituals on these people. This phenomena is also profound in the Buddhist populated area of Ladakh and Changthang.

### **Business relations**

Economic relations are not so simple however. There are lots of complexities in business relations. These arise due to the fact that the Tibetans have managed to taste success in their business in a matter of few decades, while the local Indians continue to struggle with their enterprises. The hotels and restaurants in McLeodganj are packed with foreigners, while those in lower Dharamsala only get to see domestic budget tourists. This has had a profound impact on the psyche of the Indian businessmen that despite putting best efforts, the international tourists just head for Tibetan establishments.

The Tibetans run a parallel economy. And its true that this has become a major source of simmering friction between the local Indian traders and the Tibetans. Indian traders in Dharamsala voiced their disappointment over this development. It came to light that the Dharamsala traders and shopkeepers had wholeheartedly welcomed the Indian government's decision to select their town as the headquarter of the Dalai Lama, in the hope that this would improve the economy of this derelict hill station. But within a few years after coming to Dharamsala, the Tibetans started setting up their independent businesses with all buying and selling mostly done within their own group. Gradually they are also trying to undersell and thus adversely hitting the business of the local Indian traders.

Indians expected the economy to grow with the coming of Tibetans. The economy has certainly grown but Indians are not a party to it. Tibetans came here,settled here and are now running a successful tourism industry, while Indians in nearby lower Dharmasala, just look at the cars of foreigners heading for Mcleodganj. Watching neighbours going from rags to riches in front of their eyes has had a deep psychological impact on the people. This phenomenon can also be seen in the bordering districts of West Bengal, where migrated Bangladeshi labourers have now surpassed the local Bengalis in wealth and

social status. Out there also, the local Bengalis don't hold a good view of these Bangladeshis, now settled in India. As Mahesh a local resident of Dharamsala said: "We helped and supported them, when they were poor. Now when they are rich and happy, they don't even talk to us."<sup>52</sup>

### **Tibetans ignore Indians**

It is a reality that people, who were thrown out of their country by destiny, whom nobody bothered about, are being valued by the Europeans and Americans. And when you have the Europeans for company, who would like to associate with the Indians. This is what has precisely happened in Dharamsala. The Tibetans don't want to associate with the Indians, once they have the option to be with Europeans. Hence, the Tibetans denigrate the Indians and are happy with the people, who give them short term material benefits. They even suggest to the European visitors, not to buy things to Indians. As Bajrangi, a local travel agent told us: "The Tibetans tell the Europeans that Indians are thieves."<sup>53</sup>

Even the domestic tourists visiting Dharamsala have their stories to tell. They told us that the Tibetan

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<sup>52</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

<sup>53</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

shopkeepers don't entertain the Indian customers well. They simply are not ready to show the items in their shops. Their usual question is "If you want to buy, then only I will take it out". And if one takes more time in choosing an item, they just simply shut things up and say that they don't want to sell the product. As Rajeev Jain, a tourist from Gujarat told us: 'The shopkeepers behave as if Indians are a burden, while they treat the foreigners very well.'

Moreover, as the foreigners themselves are more interested in Tibetan culture, they ignore the Indians and their shops. This has led to an insecurity complex among the Indians. The common Indian does not understand why these people are valued more by the foreigners. Hence, there is a sense of antipathy towards Tibetans, who have come from outside and are now richer, more influential and valued than the locals.

### **Locals protest the special status given to Tibetans**

The locals are not happy with the special status given to the Tibetans by the Indian government, particularly because the Tibetans are better off than the Indians in many ways. The tendency to compare the level of living of the Tibetan refugees with that of the lower socio-economic sections of the Indian society and placing them together on the same level has led to the rise of a feeling



of dislike and even hostility among a section of the local Indian population against the Tibetans.

Seen in this light the refugees may plausibly appear to be a pampered lot. There is a tendency to resent any facilities that are given to the Tibetans, but are not available to the Indian citizens. For instance, the Tibetan refugees settlements have a much higher per capita land holding than the average Indian farmer. The Tibetans have much better educational facilities than the average Indian. Here it may be noted that the Tibetan refugees themselves are conscious of the fact that the standard of living of a large number of their people is much higher than the poorer sections of the Indian society. However, it is not suggested that the Indians had any ideological differences and criticism over the Government of India's policies and programmes of rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees, especially in the light of the prevailing conditions in their own society. The Indians had neither any ultra nationalistic orientations nor any deep-rooted animus or intolerance towards the Tibetans.

But they make it a point to mention that the Tibetan refugees were enjoying facilities that were denied to the poorer sections of the Indian society. There is underlying resentment between local Indian residents and the Tibetan refugee population. International support of the Tibetan movement brings in more dollars to them,

consequently causing a certain degree of jealousy by local Indians, thus segregating the two groups. Thus, the locals argued that Indians were being discriminated against and preference was being given to the Tibetan refugees. In this connection instances were given how access to forestland and resources has been granted to the Tibetans though the same is denied to the local population.

### **Encroachments**

The locals in Mcleodganj and Dharamsala have always resented the special treatment meted out to the Tibetans. “Most of the Tibetans here are better off than us and despite this we are the ones who face the brunt of the government rules and regulations”<sup>54</sup>, says a shopkeeper in Mcleodganj. A majority of the locals say that the state government adopts a double standard in dealing with them and the Tibetans. “The authorities did not hesitate to demolish the illegal shops constructed by the Indians. However, the Tibetans continue to encroach upon forest land”<sup>55</sup>, says a shopkeeper in Dharamsala. Although eviction orders were passed on forest encroachments by

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<sup>54</sup> *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, January 3, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*

the Tibetans in Mcleodganj in 1992, they still have not been executed.

The Tibetans have been given a lot of land on lease and that too on low rates. This special treatment and a soft edge towards the refugees has frustrated the local Indians. The locals believe that as the Tibetans are now minting money in Dharamsala, they should be treated as equals and not as underprivileged. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile and the local municipal council have locked horns over the issue of renewal of prime land in Mcleodganj market as pressure is being mounted on the state government to grant lease at old rates. The municipal council passed a resolution that if the land was to be leased again then the agreement should be with Tibetans and not their government. The Tibetan government meanwhile has requested to treat the case as a special one because once Tibet becomes a free nation, everything will be handed back. The encroachments of Tibetans on forestland are also a major issue in the town. Many Tibetans have encroached on the forestland surrounding the town in an illegal manner and are even acquiring property.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> J.N. Sadhu – *The Indian Express*, Chandigarh edition, 21 October, 1997.

### **Tibetan involvement in anti-social activities**

It has been found that some Tibetan refugees are engaged in smuggling of contraband Chinese goods through Nepal and other outlets on the Sino-Indian border. They have forged effective contracts at higher levels from where they got patronage and protection. Resultantly, they are in a position to bypass the lower-level officials. It is difficult to arrive at any judgment about the fears and suspicion of the local police officials, but it does strike one in the face that many Tibetans do possess a fairly large assortment of foreign goods and gadgets, which they display with a sense of pride. They do have a higher standard of life than that their ostensible sources of income would warrant. The connection between illegal trade and bureaucratic corruption is not unusual and it is likely that some Tibetans are engaged in smuggling with bureaucratic connivance, though it is difficult to determine the extent to which this has been taking place. The local police officials reported that the refugee offenders managed to escape the normal penalties that their Indian counterparts had to face<sup>57</sup>.

Many Indians living in Dharamsala are suspicious of the refugees' involvement in smuggling not only foreign goods but also drugs. As Rohan Mittal, a local architect

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<sup>57</sup> Dharamsala: Tibetans involved in crime, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 12 April, 2000.

told us: “ These Tibetans interact with foreigners, who are drug addicts. They themselves take to drug abuse and gradually get into the profession of drug trafficking. They mainly bring marijuana from the Kullu belt and sell it to prospective buyers in Mcleodganj. Some of them are even members of international drug trafficking mafias based in Europe and the Middle East.”<sup>58</sup>

The police have also caught some Tibetans, who have looted foreigners of their cash and valuables in Mcleodganj. They even resort to violence, to snatch things if they find foreigners alone in the deserted forests around Mcleodganj. Local Indians are said to be careful while taking shortcuts in the nearby forest. There have even been cases of murders in the nearby forests involving some Tibetan youth.

The Tibetan Government is also supporting illegal activities in Dharamsala. As the Indian Express reports:

“A glaring increase in the un-registered refugees coming at Mcleodganj from Tibet in the recent past has worried the police circles a lot with the Tibetan Government reportedly hiding the antecedents of most of these Tibetans even if they get involved in criminal acts here. According to sources, there is normally a floating population of around 500 to 600 unregistered Tibetan refugees at the time in the area. And, the Tibetan

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<sup>58</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

Government facilitates them in different sectors on Indian land without bothering about their past records, which could be as bad as committing murder.”<sup>59</sup>

The support of such illegal activities by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is not in the interest of India and the Ministry of External Affairs needs to look into the matter. The non-cooperative attitude of the Tibetan government officials in this regard has made the problem persistent. It is alleged that the Tibetan government has not been clear about the details of those Tibetan refugees even, who are suspected as criminals by the local police on solid grounds. A point in case is a shooting incident that occurred at the Tibetan refugees reception centre at Mcleodganj, in which the victim was a 28 year old Tibetan monk, Kunga, who arrived here on November 28,1997 and had escaped Tibet after committing a murder as per reports. It was only after the incident that the local police could find out his background, that too with almost negligible help from the Tibetan government. The accused managed to run away and the police has not been able to carry on in-depth investigations into the case because of language problems.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Unregistered Tibetans a cause of worry to police’, *The Indian Express*, (Chandigarh) Dec 21,1997.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

## **Violent clashes and propaganda**

The fact that the Tibetans are outsiders in the region, of a different race and country have led to many frictions with the locals on various issues. Even small issues become huge when people take it on their identity. It is especially true in the case of the youth, which has got lot of energy and zeal, which sometimes leads to problematic situations. Sometimes, when the youth have clashed fatally. It has led to serious situations in the town as in the 1994- what are famous as the 'Dharamsala riots'. In 1994, a group of Tibetans and local Himachalis(Gaddis) of the area clashed, which led to serious injuries to a Gaddi youth. The youth finally succumbed to his injuries. This naturally raised hue and cry among the local population. All their antipathy towards the Tibetan community (as discussed in the previous topics) reached a peak, and they reacted sharply to it.

A whole mob of local Himachalis went to Mcleodganj and gave vent to their anger on the Tibetans. They went armed with sticks and broke many shops in Mcleodganj. They damaged Tibetan vehicles and broke the windows of the hotels. They even beat up some Tibetans, who retaliated. In the end police and paramilitary forces had

to be called to control the situation. Dharamsala town was under curfew for three days.

The Dalai Lama urged the Tibetans to exercise restraint in the matter and the situation normalized soon. This was the first time such a serious situation occurred. Obviously, it has led to many changes in the Indo-Tibetan relations ever since. But it certainly showed the sensitivity of the relations between the communities. After the incident, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile decided to have a 'voluntary code of conduct', where the Tibetans would be asked to be courteous and warm towards the locals and join them in celebration of various festivals and occasions.

In 1997–1998, there were continuous conflicts between the Tibetans and local Indian communities particularly Gaddi and Gujjar in Himachal Pradesh. But there still seems to be a friction in the society. Perhaps it is simmering underneath and it becomes obvious only when one talks to the community. This is clear by another incident, which was reported in the *Indian Express*<sup>61</sup>: “Posters threatening to kill the Dalai Lama and Tibetans if they did not leave H.P. and India, were today found pasted on some walls in Mcleodgarj, home to the Tibetan spiritual leader and temporal head. This is the

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<sup>61</sup> *Indian Express*, Chandigarh edition, October 14, 2002.



first time such posters have been spotted here since the Dalai Lama made Mcleodganj, his home. Printed in English and circulated by unknown Himachal Liberation Front, the posters used and derogatory language against Tibetans in general and Dalai Lama in particular.”

Hence, we find that the local Indians are not very happy with the Tibetan presence in Dharamsala, but they have managed to live peacefully to quite some extent, for the last 44 years. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the involvement of Tibetans in anti-social activities and their arrogant and contemptuous behaviour towards the Indian population is likely to create more tensions, unless corrective steps are not taken. Moreover, the Indian government should realize that giving foreigner status to the Tibetans would be against the national interest. If the Tibetans get the feeling that they can get away with any crime due to diplomatic immunity, it will create a culture of callousness and carelessness and flouting the Indian laws. Hence, steps need to be taken to bring them under the ambit of Indian law so that they are punished in the same manner as other Indians.

## Chapter 5

WILL THEY RETURN

BACK IF TIBET

ATTAINS FREEDOM?

## Chapter 5

### WILL THEY RETURN BACK IF TIBET ATTAINS FREEDOM?

The campaign for 'free Tibet' is going on in full swing. One can find supporters of the cause even outside the Tibetan community. Many non-Tibetan Indians and Europeans sport the 'Free Tibet' shirts. The Tibetans of India often stage protests against the Chinese oppression in Tibet. There are demonstrations, seminars and delegations to the United Nations. China now wants to talk over the Tibet issue. The 85000 Tibetans, whose overwhelming majority are peasants and herdsmen, do not want to return to Tibet as long as the Chinese are ruling the country<sup>62</sup>. Even the Dalai Lama is talking about a Tibet within China, with autonomous powers.

A 'Free Tibet' or an autonomous Tibet, whatever the case be, a big question, which arises, is whether the Tibetan refugees 'settled' in India, return back, if Tibet attains freedom. It is difficult to answer this question as even, probably, the Tibetans living in Dharamsala have not thought of this eventuality. Will the Tibetans leave everything and go away?

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<sup>62</sup> Dawa T. Norbu – Will Tibetan refugees return home?, Tibetan Review, May-June, 1973, Pg. 4.

Most of Tibetans in Dharamsala are engaged in the tourism and business. They have made hotels, restaurants, shops and emporiums. They have invested money in these enterprises. Although temporary structures in the initial stages, the establishments are now permanent. All businesses have regular domestic and international customers. Dismantling them and moving on to another place will be rather difficult. Infact these 'refugees', who are now settled in India, will again become refugees in their own country. Will the nationalistic feeling be able to overcome the feeling of sustainability and livelihoods? Will the Tibetans be able to fend for themselves in Tibet, as fruitfully as they are doing in India? These questions are better answered by the Tibetans in Dharamsala themselves.

Perhaps, various sections of the Tibetan society in Dharamsala will answer these questions differently as different goals are at stake for each of them. To the businessman, the enterprise is at stake. To the employees of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, their jobs are at stake. For the youth, their way of life and education are at stake. While for the Dalai Lama, the whole future of Tibet is at stake.

We made a survey among all the sections of the society in Dharamsala and everyone gave valuable inputs over the whole issue of returning back. While the matter of

unity of Tibet was in the back of their minds, they seemed more or less realistic to the situation. Some of them were fearful giving any direct answer, as it might create problems for them, while some simply left it to the Dalai Lama to decide. One trend was noted that the general Tibetan population's unquestioned faith on Dalai Lama during 1959 has faded due to the exposure to their modern civilized world. It may be true that not many among the Tibetans would blindly follow the Dalai Lama now.

Most of the business class Tibetans whom we talked to in Dharamsala, gave an almost negative response to going to Tibet, as they would in that event have to wind up in India. They said that they would first open branch hotels, offices etc. in Lhasa and if they run, then only they'll move. The businessmen were apprehensive, if they would run successful businesses out there. They also said that it is difficult to set up business at any place. How will it be possible to leave everything which they have made with great effort. They also were apprehensive about, how the indigenous Tibetans would treat them, when they return back. Most of them said that their children had taken up the Indian way of life and it would be difficult to leave their children and go away. India is now owned by them as their own place as their country, although they still believe they are Tibetans. As Karpa, a

hotel owner told us: “ I have built this hotel with my efforts, how can I leave it. My kids studied in India and think of Dharamsala as their home. They will not leave this place to go back to the underdeveloped Tibet as they are now used to the modern way of life. I will stay where my kids and business is.”<sup>63</sup>

All of them agreed that it would be difficult to leave. Moreover, it will take a lot of time to settle in their home country in Lhasa, as they have got used to the fast life in India. There were many among them, who told that the issue would be, decided en mass, once such a situation arises and they would certainly be guided by the Dalai Lama in this matter. When some local Indians were asked this question of returning back, most of them believed that the Tibetans would not leave. They agreed that about 30-40% of them would leave but the rest, with running businesses, would not leave. As Kamal, a chemist in Mcleodganj said: “It is not easy to leave your business and move. If it’s a situation like war or the partition of the country, leaving is possible. But in times of peace, nobody would take this disastrous decision.”<sup>64</sup>

Among the older generation, which actually crossed the Himalayas to reach India, it was believed that the desire

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Personal interview in Dharamsala.

to return to Tibet would be more, as they had seen the old Tibet and must be attached to it. But even among them there were many, who said they don't want to go back into an unsettled life. Even Girija Saklani pointed it out in her book<sup>65</sup>: "Among the older generation of Tibetans, however, there is a strong desire to stay in India permanently than face the rigour of going back to their land again. This is evidently a choice of despair. The terrible ordeal, which they faced when they escaped from Tibet, is still not erased from their <sup>memory</sup> money. They are afraid, any return to Tibet would be too strenuous and painful for them to bear, and they prefer to live peacefully in India to any return to Tibet at this stage."

Among the youth the responses ranged to all extremes. There were some (wearing 'Free Tibet' t-shirts), who said that they would certainly go back to Tibet while some blatantly refused, giving reasons of education and employment. The former ones told that the nation came first and everything came later, and hence they will leave everything and move to Tibet. Their country will give them more opportunities of business. The latter ones, on the other hand felt for Tibet, but said they would first fend for themselves, achieve something in life and then only think of settling in Tibet.

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<sup>64</sup> Personal interview at Dharamsala.

<sup>65</sup> Girija Saklani- *The Uprooted Tibetans* (1984) Cosmo publications, New Delhi, pg.134.

When the employees of the Government-in-Exile were asked this question, most of them agreed that they would leave for Tibet. It is only this section of people, who had unanimity in their decision. A possible reason for this was the fact that their jobs are with the government. Wherever the government goes, they will have to go or leave their jobs, instead. In present circumstances, it is not possible for a Tibetan to leave his source of bread and butter, and hence the employees will go with the government. Another reason is that probably the government will pay for their trip back home and take care of their comfort.

The lamas and the *chomos* (the male and female monks respectively) were unanimous in their opinion of going back, as would the Dalai Lama<sup>66</sup>. As they have nothing at stake, they as monks would follow their spiritual leader. Their lives are spent in monasteries, and whether the monastery is in Tibet or Dharamsala, it does not matter to them. All that matters is the guidance of their good teachers and the Dalai Lama.

Women are one class in the Tibetan society, who according to Jayanti Alam,<sup>67</sup> have a good opportunity to put their views on any matter. We interviewed a few

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<sup>66</sup> It can be taken for granted that the Dalai Lama will leave, once Tibet becomes free.

<sup>67</sup> Jayanti Alam- *Tibetans in exile*.



women most of whom said, they were happy in India. They said that they have been living in India for quite a while and now it is not possible to go to a new world. It would involve a lot of inconvenience. They said that India holds a better future of their kids in terms of education and employment. They mentioned that even though they would not be in Tibet but they would keep the flag of Tibet unfurled in India. There were some who said that they would follow the footsteps of their religious leader-the Dalai Lama. But we could find that they were telling this, as if someone had fed them to say it.

Comparing the overall results of this survey (excluding the responses of the Indians), it was found that people had made their decisions. There seems to be a clear-cut decision on the issue of staying back. It may be mentioned here that when we asked the people to put up their names and addresses on the questionnaire, they refused to do it. They said that even though they were telling it to me directly, they would not like to give it in writing as it might lead to action on them by some elements in the Tibetan community. We had to pacify them that they can give their names and not the addresses and their identity would be kept secret. Still there were many people who even wanted to keep their names as a secret. There were many people who refused to answer the question as they thought it to be

provocative and absurd. They said that such a question should not be asked as it is irrelevant and the decision is that of the Dalai Lama and not a personal choice.

The results of the survey showed that a majority of 72% of the Tibetans settled in Dharamsala were in favour of staying back, while the rest 28% were in favour of going back. It shows the picture of the near future and India needs to take this reality into account while formulating its policies. The results have been compiled in the following chart:

Category	Number of respondents	Would go back	Would not go back
Old	25	1	24
Young	25	5	20
Govt Emp.	25	23	2
Women	25	4	21
Businessmen	25	2	23
Miscellaneous	25	6	19
Total	150	42	108
Percentage	100	28	72

➤ Source: Field Survey, Dharamsala, March 2004.

### **What will happen to Dharamsala?**

As already discussed, Dharamsala developed as a town due to the 'Dalai Lama Factor' and the influx of the Tibetan refugees. If the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans leave Dharamsala, what will happen to the economy and society of the town, which has been flourishing for so many years? What will happen to Mcleodganj? Will it bear a deserted look as before 1960? Will the tourists come to Dharamsala even after the departure of Dalai Lama? We asked these questions to the residents of Dharamsala and the Tibetans, who said they'll stay back and also to some Indians.

Most of Tibetans said that Dharamsala will remain a tourist spot, because people will still come to see the old residence of Dalai Lama. The natural beauty of the place will attract the tourists. Although there will certainly be a loss of tourists to some extent, but it won't be so much as to destroy the town. It will be the ideal town in the Tibetan world, where people will come from Tibet to study and see modernity. It will be a place of national importance, as it is this place from where the Free Tibet campaign started.

The Indians admitted that, certainly tourism industry will suffer but there is a possibility of some foreigners still visiting the place. May be the domestic tourists will take the place of foreigners. They admitted that most people come to Dharamsala due to the Dalai Lama, but the town also has its natural beauty, which will always attract tourists to the place.

Avinash Sharma a lecturer of history in the Dharamsala Government College said; “Dharamsala will be something like Goa and Pondicherry. In Goa, the Portuguese culture still remains, although the Portuguese have left, similarly Dharamsala will be known for the Tibetan Culture. Although the Tibetans have not married Indians to the extent of Portuguese, but still tourists will come to the town to get a smell of ‘Tibet’.”<sup>68</sup>

What will happen to Dharamsala after the Tibetans leave remains to be seen? But it appears that they will not completely vacate this place as a flat. They have been staying here for half a century now. It is not possible to take everything from here. Naturally, even if they leave for Tibet, they will leave a lot for the town Dharamsala. If not everything than – memories. Tashi Delek.

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<sup>68</sup> Personal interview in Dharamsala.

# **Chapter 6**

# **Conclusion**

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A more or less clearcut picture of the development and present status of Dharamsala emerges after the present study. Dharamsala is looked at from every angle- as a town, as a society and as an economy, very different from the other Tibetan settlements and nearby towns. Dharamsala's evolution does not have any parallels in recent history.

Dharamsala's development from a deserted British hill station to a refugee town for Tibetans was definitely due to the efforts of N.N.Nowrojee. His insistence, made the Central Government choose the place as the headquarters of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetans shifted here in 1960. Ever since, the town has been home to more and more Tibetans, who come across the mountains. It is a pilgrimage to people, who come to see the Dalai Lama.

The town developed as a result of the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama. It was promoted as the 'Little Lhasa'. This solved two purposes- one of keeping the memory of Tibet alive and the second of attracting the tourists. The internationalization of the Tibet issue, made the whole of

Europe and America interested in Tibetans and they rushed to Dharamsala to know what it was. Some of them even wanted to know about the spiritual and Tantric Buddhism- and Dharamsala was the place. They yearned to get a glimpse of the God-king- the Dalai Lama. For the foreigners, it was just a craze to see the Dalai Lama. As the foreigners took interest in him, Tibetans were eager to satisfy them. The larger than life image of Dalai Lama is dominant in Dharamsala. People use this image for religious and other purposes. The smiling portrait of the Dalai Lama can be found in all shops, even of the Indians. This 'Dalai Lama factor' was also crucial in the emergence of tourism in Dharamsala. All these factors led to a tourism boom in Dharamsala, which transformed the town in a matter of years.

The tourism boom has had a tremendous effect on the town. Hotels, shops, restaurants and health clubs have mushroomed in every corner of Dharamsala. One can find cyber cafes and money exchanger after every second shop. Taxi unions and tour operators have propped up and one can find the streets of Mcleodganj filled with foreigners. This boom also had an effect, no doubt on the economy, but also the society in Dharamsala.

One can find names such as Shangri-la restaurant, Tibet Travels, Yeti Hotel and other such names of shops,

which attract tourists. Even non-Tibetans have their shops named in Tibetan. Hence, we find a desire to attract tourists by portraying 'Tibetanness'. This phenomenon has seeped into the whole society. Try to be ethnic Tibetan and you will attract foreigners. All have become money minded and consumerism has crept in. Although economically, it has meant more and more job opportunities for Tibetans and Indians, but it has also led to the westernization of the society.

The tourism boom has had a negative effect on the town as well. The town now has become very dirty, with garbage being thrown in the valley. The streets of the town are littered and there are traffic jams, as the number of vehicles has increased. Moreover, as more and more Tibetans keep reaching Dharamsala from China, there is a stress on the resources. There is water scarcity in the town. As the population is increasing and the area is less there is more crowding.

Within this tourism boom and the stresses of everyday life, lives the Tibetan society. A society trying to solve its problems and at the same time evolving with time. It has various sections and classes in it- the monks, the businessmen, the employees of the Government-in-Exile, the youth, the women etc. All have their own lifestyle and their own problems of survival in a foreign country. There



are many issues, which concern them like education, health, employment, basic amenities etc. And then there are tensions within the refugees. All this constitutes the Tibetan society at Dharamsala.

The youth do not believe in the Tibetan education system. Many of them educated in Indian convent schools, behave like foreigners and have no touch with their culture. They do not get employment as the Tibetan Government-in-exile has no vacancies and it is difficult to get jobs outside. Moreover, higher education is expensive and there are very few scholarships. The uneducated Tibetans think of sneaking away to foreign countries by marrying some foreigners in Dharamsala. They want to go to the West and enjoy life there. Many take to drug abuse and some even to drug trafficking, under foreign bosses.

Most of the people engaged in business have opened hotels, shops, restaurant etc. There are many who have taken to selling carpets and wollen sweaters by setting up small temporary shops. Some Tibetan medicine centers and health centers have been set up. The local youth have taken to taxi driving and have become guides and tour operators.

Among these day to day activities there are some tensions as well. The Tibetans who have been staying in

India for a considerable time, have taken to the modern way of life. Hence, they don't take the recently arrived refugees in good light. They consider the new arrivals from Tibet as uncivilized people. There are political differences among the Tibetan refugees, which have led to the formation of groups among the refugees. There is a group, which supports the acceptance of Indian citizenship, while the other opposes it. There have even been clashes within refugees on this issue.

The Tibetans settlements are more or less closed and isolated and similar is their settlement in Dharamsala. There is hardly any interaction with the locals on a personal level. Most of the interactions are at a business level. This lack of interaction has even led to much bias for the other community, both ways. Indian tourists feel that the Tibetans try to ignore them and don't entertain them well in their shops. Indians helped them in their bad times and now they don't want to pay it back.

Moreover, the Tibetans have gained rich dividends in the tourism sector and Indians have been left out. This has disgruntled the Indians. The foreigners prefer to interact with the Tibetans than the Indians. This has led to a sense of antipathy towards the Tibetans. The alleged involvement of Tibetans in smuggling and drug trafficking has spoiled their image in the eyes of the

Indians. Their involvement in petty crimes and violence has also spoiled their image.

The land encroachments by the Tibetans in Mcleodganj have annoyed the Indians, as has the special treatment of Tibetans by the Indian government. People feel that the Tibetans get off with anything, due to the soft corner of the Indian government. The Tibetans are given better facilities, while the Indians, who are poorer than the Tibetans are left out. There have been violent clashes between the Tibetans and the Indians as in the 1994 riots, when Indians destroyed many Tibetan shops in Mcleodganj as a return to the murder of an Indian youth.

Most of the Indians think that the Tibetans in Dharamsala will not go back, even if Tibet becomes free in future. This was found to be considerably true as a result of a survey done with various sections of the Tibetan population. It was found that a majority (72%) of the Tibetans would not like to leave India even if Tibet becomes free. While the businessmen, youth and the old were apprehensive about going back, the government employees said they would like to go back.

Whatever be the case but Dharamsala's phenomenal growth as a town and society with the coming in of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans is a reality. The town has given refuge to the Tibetans for the last 44 years and

made many a family flourish in its villages. No doubt it has lived up to its name 'dharamsala'- a Hindi word, which means, a place of rest, where travellers halt after a long journey.

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