CHAPTER - III

Tibetan Society and their Flight
Tibet is a land of mountains. It is bordered on the North by the Kuenlun and Tang La range, on the West the massif of the Kara Koram and Ladakh mountains and on the South the majestic sweep of the Himalayas. It is a plateau whose area is approximately 4,70,000 square miles with an average altitude of 16,000 feet above sea level. As for climate and vegetation, Tibet is a country of contrasts. In the river valleys crops of barley, wheat, peas, beans etc., are grown. Sheep, goats, yak and kyang (a cross between ass and horse) are found in large numbers all over the plateau. Musk-deer found in the Himalayan areas of Tibet are of great economic importance, while wool, fur and hides are the important export items of Tibet. Though Tibetan lands are mineral-rich, it has not been commercially exploited and the real magnitude of their richness is not fully known. However, it is believed that the land is rich in gold, iron, lead and coal.

Because of rugged terrain, Tibetans live in small clusters of houses. Their houses are small and built with locally available materials. A cluster of houses makes a small village and several such villages are found scattered all over Tibet. These small villages look like small settlements. They have very poor transportation and communication facility. Owing to geographical barriers, interaction between people living in one region and another region is very
difficult. From region to region one could find variations in customs, manners, food habits and religious rituals. Though Tibetans are, in general, followers of Buddhism, there are regional and cultural differences amongst them. But all in all, it is believed that the Buddhism seen and practised in Tibet is of a liberal kind.

Tibet is a country with absolutely no western influence at all. Over the years, the Tibetans have developed their own institutional structure and way of life which are unique in character. In the life of the Tibetan people, religion occupies a predominant position. Their religion is a form of Buddhism which believes in reincarnation. The ruler of the country is a religious leader - a monk called 'Dalai Lama'. It is believed that a subsequent Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of the previous one. They are so religious minded that a very huge percentage of the male population takes to priesthood. In Tibet one can find great monasteries, some of which house more than a thousand monks, scattered over the country. Besides this, there are umpteen number of hermitages and smaller collection of priests.

The normal food and drink of an ordinary Tibetan include yak's meat, mutton, barley floor, cheese and tea. Though they embrace Buddhism which prohibits non-vegetarianism, Tibetans are non-
vegetarians. Their favourite drinks are tea and beer. Tea is prepared by mixing salt and butter with tea, and beer is brewed from barley.

Tibetans, by and large, are pleasure-loving people. This is not surprising because their way of life is simple and their needs are few, thus they have a lot of leisure which they spend joyfully in gambling, horse racing, picnicking, and such things are very common among Tibetans.

The social organisation in Tibet consists of the nobles, the traders, and the peasants. The nobles are the rich class in Tibet; they own estates, farms and grazing grounds. They could be considered as the village landlords. However, the nobles are fewer in numbers.

The landed-gentry and the peasantry and shepherds are the two main classes that form the Tibetan society. Taken together they are the majority and belong to the so called middle-class society. They engage in trade on different commodities. As a matter of fact Tibetans are endowed with an aptitude for trade. Not only the ordinary class of professional traders, but the nobles and the monks also engage in trade. The important articles of export include gold, yak-tails, hides, borax salt, musk and medicinal herbs, while their items of import include tea, cotton goods, hardware, precious stones,
tobacco etc. Shops and retail trade are mostly managed by women; men, however, look after the other commercial dealings.

Though there are cultivable lands, one of the major constraints in the development of agriculture is scarcity of labour. Of course, landlords have enough land, but their difficulty is in getting workers. Though there is a great gulf between the peasant and these landlords, the peasants are not treated as slaves. They are paid well and looked after well.

Shepherds and herdsmen live at higher altitude. They come once in a year down the valley to sell their products and buy their necessities like barley, wheat etc. Mostly these shepherds are the employees of nobilities and landed-gentry. They are employed on contract basis and their job involves taking the sheep and goats of their masters for grazing.

Women occupy a very important position in the socio-economic life of Tibetan Society. However, in religious activities women have only a lower position in Tibet. An instance in this context is worth mentioning. The religious head of Tibetans, Dalai Lama, has three forms of blessings to people who seek his blessings: touching the suppliant’s head with both the hands, with one hand, and with a
tassel. Of these, touching with tassel is supposed to be the lowest form of blessings and women are invariably blessed by Dalai Lama by touching their heads with tassel. That apart, women command great respect and status in the society. They are physically strong and capable of undertaking heavy manual works. As stated earlier, they have a great role in the trading activities.

The social, economic, cultural and religious settings in the Tibetan society are shaped or influenced by the ecology of Tibet. Small houses, scattered villages, dependence on natural resources for consumption and production, isolation from rest of the world due to limited transport and communication facilities restricting their mobility, simple way of life and an economy in which transactions are mostly on barter system are the general features of Tibetan life. All these features are the manifestation of the ecological conditions of the Tibetan plateau.

Tibetan society consists of two major groups – the ecclesiastic and the lay. The ecclesiastic group is composed of priests and clergymen. They are supposed to belong to high birth order. The peasants (cultivators), the nomads, pastoral folks and traders belong to the lay group. Lands are possessed either by the state monastery or the feudal lords. Therefore, virtually land is not a marketable item
in Tibet. All the peasants are in fact workers in the lands owned by state monastery or the feudal lords. This state of affairs has contributed to the continuance of feudal system in Tibet.

Society in Tibet shows a clear demarcation between upper classes and lower class. There is a distinction between nobles and ordinary men by a clearly defined gradation. This division is so clear that each one in Tibet knows whether he/she is a noble or ordinary person. The class distinction is very important in the social life of the Tibetans. The system provides for rules and customs separately for nobles and ordinary men. The manners, the dress, the address and the language of nobles are different from that of the ordinary. Though this class distinction may look very odd to an outsider, for Tibetans it is a part of their social life and they are fully reconciled to this class system which preaches that a noble is a noble because he is noble and an ordinary is an ordinary because he is ordinary.

The institution of marriage in the family system of Tibetans has been evolved and administered in a way, that is influenced by the ecological environment. In the ecological environment in which they are positioned, Tibetan families cannot afford to have large number of people. This factor has been the basis on which they have built the
systems and customs relating to their marriage, marital status and relations.

Practice of polyandry is widely prevalent in Tibetan society. This system in Tibet is incorporated in the institution of marriage. Under this system a woman will have a husband to whom she is married, and the husband will take his brothers as co-husbands to his wife. Wherever the principal husband takes his brothers as co-husbands, it is a fraternal polyandry. A principal husband can take as co-husbands who are not his brothers and in that case, it is non-fraternal polyandry. The marital life between a woman and her principal and co-husbands is so arranged that the co-husbands will get the right to sex with their wife only when the principal husband is absent in the family. In fact in a fraternal polyandry, the co-husbands will be mostly away from the house on trading business or grazing cattle. Because of this, mostly the principal husband will be playing the role of real husband to the wife.

A peculiar feature of the system of polyandry prevalent in the Tibetan society is that co-husbands are admitted to marriage union only with the permission of the wife. Polygamy is also not uncommon. While the prevalence of polyandry among the ordinary class is mainly for keeping the family size small, the practice of
polyandry as well as polygamy in the noble class is mainly to keep the family estate within the family-fold. The family properties are inherited in the Tibetan system by right of primogeniture. So, in noble families it is not uncommon that the eldest brother or sister marries and others go as co-husbands or co-wives.

Tibetans, as a whole, are highly religious and naturally are influenced by it in all walks and aspects of their life. Their customs and habits are so embedded in religion that they not only practice religion with absolute faith in it, but also blindly accept the philosophy of life the religion inculcates. As a matter of fact, Tibetans are governed by religious faith and because of this they are highly conservative in their outlook. It is not surprising that such a community has a strong dislike for changes of any sort.

Even politics in Tibet is very much linked with religion. Their spiritual and religious head, Dalai Lama, is also the political head of the State. The Tibetan religion is popularly known as Lamaism, which is a form of Buddhism.

Tibetans spend a major part of their time and money on religious matters. A large number of their population that enters the
priesthood live in monasteries and there are some very big monasteries which house more than thousand monks.

There are different groups and sects among the Tibetans. There are two schools, old and new, of Lamaism. Though there are numerous sects, the main four sects are the Ka-Dam-Pa, the Sa-Kya-Pa, the Ka-Gyur-Pa, and the Ge-Lu-Pa. Of these, Ge-Lu-Pa sect enjoys the privilege of providing both political and religious leadership to the Tibetans. Tibetans have two important religious and political leaders, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, and both belong to Ge-Lu-Pa sect. It is interesting to note that their offices are non-hereditary. These religious heads are not elected but selected. Since they are supposed to be the incarnations, they are identified as heads even at an early age. It is curious to note that Tibetans locate and identify their ruler by divinations and oracles and the child-incarnation is brought-up in monasteries and groomed as religious and political head for the nation.

China's claim over Tibet itself, however, has a long history. The China-Tibet conflict dates back to 1859. However, the climax of this conflict reached at about 1949, the year in which Peoples Republic of China was formed in the place of Nationalist Government. This political change in China had its effect on Tibet as well. The Tibetans
were more or less sure that Mao – Tse – Tung who spearheaded the
Chinese revolution would extend communist rule to Tibet. Their
apprehension prompted them in July 1949 to expel Chinese officers
and traders from Tibet. China was more vigorous than ever in
pronouncing that Tibet was an integral part of China and it would go
to any length in ‘liberating’ Tibet from the western influence.

But it was during the later part of 1950 that the Chinese
practically invaded Tibet. The conflict continued unabated and by
autumn 1958 the Chinese Troops actually intruded into Tibet. Over
the years, the Chinese have grown very strong and have been able to
secure control over many parts of Tibet. Dalai Lama in his own way
resisted all the pressures from China. However, on 17th of March
1959 when the Chinese fired two shells at the site of Dalai Lama’s
Palace, he felt that he had not succeeded in his efforts to save Tibet
from China and decided to flee Tibet immediately. Accordingly, Dalai
Lama, along with 80 companions, left Tibet and sought permission to
enter India. His request was granted by India and Dalai Lama and
his companions were accommodated in the great monastery at
Tawang. Later they moved to Tezpur in Assam on 18th of April 1959.

It is reported that subsequent to Dalai Lama’s escape to India,
there was heavy fighting in Tibet between Tibetans and Chinese for
quite some time. In the hands of mighty Chinese, the Tibetans suffered heavy loss of people and property and many of their leaders were executed. Not able to resist further, thousands of Tibetans, abandoning their homes and properties, left Tibet and tried to reach Indian frontier trekking through highly hazardous routes.

After suffering heavy losses - not only of their belongings that they could carry with them, but also many of their kith and kins - those who were able to survive and succeed to reach India sought asylum in Indian soil as refugees. Continued fighting in Tibet and suppression of Tibetans in their homeland forced more number of Tibetans to cross over the borders to reach India as refugees. "By the end of 1959 at least 17,000 Tibetans had been received in camps organised by the Government of India and the number was terribly growing . . . . The initial administrative difficulties were overcome gradually and the refugees were progressively classified and distributed into different camps."¹

Within a decade or so, most of Tibetan refugees had been settled in different camps in India while many of them settled in Nepal and Bhutan also. And some of them were sponsored by

individuals and organisations from abroad, particularly from Switzerland, Canada, Germany and the United States of America.

The task of rehabilitating the Tibetan refugees in India was undertaken by the Ministry of External Affairs. The rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees was planned and organised taking into consideration the social, economic, cultural background of Tibetans. As Tibetans in their homeland depended on land, livestock and handicraft, the settlements of Tibetan refugees in India were established as mainly agricultural settlements with scope for introducing small scale units. Such Tibetan refugee settlements were organised mainly in the states of Mysore, Orissa, Madya Pradesh, the North – East Frontier Agency and in Sikkim. All these settlements were established as agricultural settlements where the people could take handicraft as secondary vocation. In the state of Mysore (now it is the state of Karnataka) the first settlement was established in Bylakuppe near Mysore. Later three more settlements at Mundgod, Hunsoor and Kollegal were established. Of all the settlements in Karnataka State, Bylakuppe in not only the first but also the largest settlement. This settlement in Bylakuppe has been chosen as the area of study for this research work.
Obsessed by a sense of insecurity, particularly after Dalai Lama himself fled to India, there was a continuous exodus of Tibetans to India as refugees beginning from the early parts of 1959. According to an estimate, by the end of 1960, Chinese retaliation against the fighters, continued expropriation of small farmers, and the desperate shortage of food combined to swell the number of refugees to about 80,000. For obvious reasons, it was clear that there was no prospect of these refugees returning to their homeland in the conceivable future. Therefore, the Government of India faced a situation wherein it had to settle these refugees more or less on a permanent basis. Though it was a tremendous task, it had to be accomplished because it was apprehended that if they were not properly settled, they would create a highly sensitive socio-political problems later.

Realising the magnitude and implications of the problem, the Government of India formulated a plan for rehabilitating the Tibetan refugees. According to this plan, the refugees were sent to different settlements in different parts of the country. The Union Government directed the State Governments to help in organising settlements for the Tibetan refugees. The then Government of Mysore came forward to rehabilitate 3,000 refugees in Bylakuppe at an estimated cost of about Rupees 30 lakhs to be borne by the Government of India.
For the purpose of settlement, the refugees were grouped into units of five adult members (with or without children) called a "family". It is relevant to note that when the Tibetans fled their country, the families got so much disintegrated and there were not many wholesome families by the time the refugees reached India. Because of this, when units of five adults (with or without children) were formed the members in each unit invariably were not the members of the same family that fled Tibet.

Even members belonging to different castes and sub-castes were pooled to form a family of five adults (perhaps, a very secular way of forming a family). Each of the family so formed was allotted five acres of arable land, a set of agricultural tools and implements, one working bullock and a residential house. Besides, free subsistence ration was also provided for a specified period. Plans for training the refugees in the local cultivation methods were formulated and implemented.

In the settlement, provisions were made for health-care, schooling, drinking water, lighting etc. In fact, it was a unique and commendable programme of refugee rehabilitation undertaken, on such a mass scale by the Government of India. In this task of rehabilitating Tibetan refugees, aid was received in cash and kind.
from international organisations and agencies like the American Emergency Committee for Tibetan Relief, Catholic Relief Service in collaboration with National Christian Welfare Conference, Swiss Aid Abroad, Young Men’s Christian Association, Indo-German Social Service, and Co-operative for American Relief Everywhere etc.

The place, Bylakauppe, selected for the Tibetan refugee settlement is located on the Mysore – Madikeri trunk road, some 84 kms from Mysore city. The whole area of settlement, though a forest area consists of uninhabited village - Gollarahosahalli, Kailasapur, Arlikumari, Gulledahalli, Handigudda, Manchadevanahalli, Basavanayeni, Doddarahve, Laxmipura and Chowkur - within the dense forest, is very fertile. Within the 16 kms periphery of this settlement, Periyapatna - the taluk headquarters, Kushalnagar - an important shandy centre of Coorg district, are situated. This place located in the Malnad region gets moderate to heavy rainfall and the climate is often hot and moist.

Reports say that soon after the preparation began at Bylakuppe (for establishing the settlement) “the refugees were selected from among the residents of various transit camps in north India by the Government of India, in view of their agricultural background and were sent in batches to Bylakuppe. The first batch consisting of 624
refugees arrived during December 1960 and this was followed by the second batch consisting of 576 persons . . . . Many of the families which were in indigent circumstances were granted Rs. 10 each for purchase of at least a few essential utensils. After a brief period of rest, these refugees were offered jungle clearance work on wages. Fresh batches of refugees were received during 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964 and February 1965.  

The Bylakuppe settlement is no more a new story. Ever since it came into being much water has flown in the river Cauvery and the present situation at Bylakuppe is in contrast to what it was in 1960 and tells a forty-year story of a group of people who left their homeland four decades ago and by sheer accident of destiny had to come and settle here.