Research Setting

5.1 On Darjeeling: The Fieldwork Site

Darjeeling district of the state of West Bengal provides a unique context for exploring not only “local integration”\(^1\) as a durable solution to the situation of protracted exile of Tibetans in India but also the experience of “self-settled”\(^2\) or “spontaneously settled” refugees who have lived outside the permanent settlements that were specially built under the rehabilitation scheme for Tibetans in India. For purpose of illustration, it would be prudent at the outset to describe Darjeeling district as a whole of which Darjeeling town is a part before turning to the latter. The district falls under Jalpaiguri Division that consists of six districts. The district itself is divided into four sub-divisions: Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Siliguri with Darjeeling sub-division as the district headquarter. The total population of Darjeeling district is 1,695,900 comprising of 826,334 males and females 779,566 with 23.54% as the decadal growth rate according to Census of India 2001, Provisional Population Totals, Series - 1.

Darjeeling (rdo rje gling in Tibetan) is a creation of the nineteenth century and is a result of the involvement of the British Indian Government in the affairs of the neighbouring Himalayan States. Throughout the 19\(^{th}\) century the British interest in the overland trade with Tibet and central Asia and the urgency for safeguarding the northern border of India against China and Tibet turned out to be guiding factor in the making of British policy towards Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. Sikkim was of special interest to the English rulers because of its strategic position. In 1828 Captain Lloyd along with the Commercial Resident at Malda J.W. Grant visited this area in connection with disputes between

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1 The concept of integration is a problematic one. The UNHCR’s definition of integration as “the process by which he refugee is assimilated into the social and economic life of a new national community” is clearly unsatisfactory since it is tautological as it merely replaces the term to be defined with another word which is presumed to be synonymous. Barbara Harrell-Bond’s definition is more suggestive here as it refers to “a situation in which the host and refugee communities are able to co-exist, sharing the same resources – both economic and social – with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host community” (1986: 7).

2 It has been claimed that self-settlement is inevitable for two reasons. Firstly, all refugees could not possibly be accommodated in organized settlements because of insufficient funds. Secondly, organized settlements have largely failed to achieve the objective of economic self-sufficiency: the so called land settlements have been unable to provide enough land for the settlers to make a living and “wage earning” settlements provide only seasonal employment (Kok 1989: 420).
Sikkim and Nepal. They noticed the position of Darjeeling both as a prospective hill resort – a sanitarium for British troops and an outpost of strategic importance overlooking Tibet. Darjeeling was then part of Sikkim (bras ljongs) and inhabited by Lepchas – regarded as the aboriginal inhabitants of the area). The Raja of Sikkim was under obligation to the British for having restored the territories Sikkim had lost to Nepal and when the British approached him for taking Darjeeling on lease he could not refuse. Darjeeling was gradually annexed to British India beginning 1st February 1835 – marking the period of execution of a deed of grant by the Raja of Sikkim. With the annexation of Darjeeling from Sikkim and Bhutan and the containment of Nepal, the British started to increase trade with Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet through Darjeeling.

From 1850 onwards trade with Tibet gradually developed. Kalimpong (ka blon sbug), also situated within Darjeeling district and ethnically similar to Darjeeling town had become a thriving centre for trading activities. Traders found it profitable to invest in land, build houses and have some members of their families live there running guest houses and restaurants. For many Tibetans, the pleasant little town became in the course of time, an ideal second home because of its close proximity to their original home as well as the easy access it afforded to other Indian centres of trade and pilgrimage (Wangyal 1978: 11).³ The Indo-Tibetan trade came to an abrupt end with the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

Darjeeling was sparsely populated when the British set their foot there. The boundaries with its neighbouring territories were notional and people from adjoining places would come for grazing sheep and cattle or for cutting firewood. With the discovery of Darjeeling by the British as an ideal retreat, this wild frontier was gradually normalized into a “hill station”. Colonialism ended its fluidity by putting it firmly under the control of its knowledge system. This production of colonial knowledge about Darjeeling led to the refiguring of the “fuzzy” identities into an “enumerated” community (Kaviraj 1997: 156-57). The decade of 1860 saw a veritable explosion in the production and circulation of Gazetteers and manuals that included extensive reports on the manners and customs of

³ For more on the history of Indo-Tibetan trade see Markham 1875: 299-315.
the castes, tribes and religion of the region. Immigration was encouraged by the colonial state, as it required cheap labour for building infrastructure for its “hill station” and most importantly for its teeming tea gardens. It was within the matrix of race relations in the colonial situation that the colonial enterprise encouraged migration. The British planters did not fail in employing sardars (local appellation for agents) who would go o Nepal and bring back young and healthy labourers to work in their tea gardens. The sardars in return got commissions from planters (Dozey 1989 [1920]: 120).

The most striking aspect of the history of Darjeeling is the issue of migration. The point of contention seems to be centred around a report by Dr. Campbell, the superintendent of Darjeeling who claimed to have raised the population from “not more than hundred souls in 1839 to about 10000 in 1849 chiefly by immigration from the neighbouring states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan” (O’Malley 1989 [1922]: 22). The entire debate tends to be caught in the cycle of cause and effect or what is popularly known in migration theories as “push” and “pull” factors. While there is unanimous consent with regard to the aboriginality of the Lepchas, the question whether the groups subsumed under the generic term “Nepali” or “Gorkha” could be thought of as “immigrants” or “settlers” should be reconsidered. Tanka Subba on writing about the ethnic history of Darjeeling remarked, “The monument of belief about the so-called Nepalis is erected on shallow foundation and this must be shaken if not pulled down. This is not done to legitimize their claim over Darjeeling, as some may imagine but simply for the sake of truth” (Subba 1992: 37). The ethnic composition of the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling, which had, thus, undergone change since the middle of the 19th century till the present times was evidently caused by the waves of massive migration from Nepal which in turn emanated from three major factors. First, the marginalization of the non-Hindu Nepali Buddhist communities by the high caste Hindu monarchy in the second half of the 18th century led to out-migration of these non-Hindu Nepali communities such as Rai, Limbu, Gurung from the eastern region of Nepal. These Nepali communities found the hill sub-division of Darjeeling a convenient and accessible place for settlement. Second, the recruitment of Nepalis as tea plantation labourers by the British at low remuneration because of their poverty stricken backgrounds throughout the second half of the 19th century. Lastly, the
need to recruit Nepalis for the Gorkha Battalions in the Indian army during the post-Sepoy Revolt period (Dasgupta 1999: 54-55).

The Nepalis consist of numerous distinct and interlinked tribes embracing different languages and dialects, costumes and rituals. Among some tribes even different scripts and mutually unintelligible dialects can be found while in some cases it is possible to find rare relationships of vocabulary with people of another distant area with whom the Nepali tribe had apparently no documented contact. There are references to show that the Limbus and the Mangars are one of the earliest inhabitants of the region. “Beyond a few Lepchas and Limbuses with their little clearing in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal or a stray visitor from the table-lands of Tibet, the Darjeeling Hills were practically uninhabited” (O’Malley 1989 [1922]: 22). Given the migratory nature of life in the Himalayas (Pinn 1986: 14) for many centuries before the arrival of the British, for the Lepchas not to mention the Nepali castes like the Limbus and the Mangars who are said to have had their roots in the Darjeeling region itself, neither the term “immigrant” nor “autochthonous” can be appropriately applied to them in the strict sense.

5.2 Stating the Initial Fieldwork Situation

In order to understand the meanings that Tibetan refugees/diasporics give to their predicament in Darjeeling (rdo rje gling), it is appropriate to state clearly what entails doing fieldwork in social settings of displacement. The fieldwork, which requires one to be physically situated at the site was principally concentrated in the Darjeeling Municipal Area of the Darjeeling district. The district resembles an inverted wedge with its base resting on Sikkim, its sides touching Nepal, Bhutan and the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal while its apex projects into the West Dinajpur district of West Bengal (Gazetteer of Darjeeling, West Bengal). The southern parts of the district (Siliguri and the terai) consists of foothills and flat lands (340 ft) and the northern parts (Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong) are mountainous (12000 ft). Owing to this great range of altitude the district possesses different climatic zones that support a wide variety of vegetation. The Darjeeling Municipal Area has an area of 10.57 sq km according to Census of India 2001.
The total population of Darjeeling Municipality is 107,197 comprising of 55,963 males and 51,234 females according to Census of India 2001, Final Population Totals, Urban Agglomerations and Towns, Series - 1. This can be compared to the total population of Darjeeling Municipality in 1991 which stood at 73062 with 37763 males and 35299 females according to Census of India 1991.\(^4\)

Darjeeling town is located in the Sadar subdivision of the district of Darjeeling which is also the headquarters of the district. The actual fieldwork while being based at the Darjeeling Municipal Area was also conducted at the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre situated in the Hill side Lebong at an average altitude of 2143 metres above sea level. Darjeeling town is situated on a long, narrow mountain ridge of the Sikkim Himalayas that descends abruptly to the bed of the Great Rangit River. The town lies at an elevation of about 7,000 feet (2,100 m). On a clear day Darjeeling affords a magnificent view of Kanchenjunga (28,169 feet [8,586 m]), and Mount Everest can just be seen. It was constituted a municipality in 1850. Chowrasta forms the town's main centre, the former being a broad open space on the saddle of the mountain-ridge and the most attractive promenade. The Mall road is a circular road running from the Chowrasta, northwards along the western side of the ridge reaching the gates of the Government House (was the summer residence of the Governor of Bengal during the colonial era) and then circling round the base of Observatory Hill and returning again to the Chowrasta along the eastern side of the ridge. Observatory Hill, the town's highest point (7,137 feet), houses the Mahakakal Temple. Birch Hill contains a natural park and the Institute of Mountaineering. The Lloyd Botanic Gardens were laid out in 1865. Besides these attractions, Darjeeling has a zoo, a natural history museum, a racecourse, a Botanical garden, cemeteries and several hospitals. It is also the seat of the University of North Bengal, founded in 1962, with a number of affiliated colleges, including a medical school, in the town. Tourism is the mainstay of Darjeeling’s economy. It was for the first time systematically organized since November 1975 when the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation came

into being. The important point to note here is that the hotels and transport companies are owned by plainsmen. The local communities are engaged mainly in service occupations such as taxi-driving, selling of vegetables and other articles and other government jobs. The only hill community which has a stake in this industry is the Tibetan (Subba 1988: 13-15).

5.2.1 Access

One of the key and yet most difficult steps in ethnography is gaining access to a social setting that is relevant to the research problem in which one is interested. In humanitarian situations, access to refugees who do not live in camps is a major problem both for researchers and practitioners and large numbers of the displaced are often omitted from studies. Difficulties of access to refugee communities stem from logistics - remote areas, bad roads, hidden communities, security problems and lack of trust. In any refugee community there are also groups of people who are difficult to reach due to norms of public display and voice or simply their work and living conditions. Researchers tend to concentrate their activities in camps where refugees are more easily accessible and where they can be identified by officials or aid organizations. Refugee camps are however not a routine site for ethnographic fieldwork and displaced people are not the usual “native informants” of anthropologists. Yet, fieldwork among refugees almost necessarily speaks to profound riddles and questions that live at the very heart of the discipline. One classic analytic arena, the anthropological study of classification and categories has much to say about some key dynamics in the social construction of refugeeness in the contemporary world (Malkki 1995: 5).

The people who appear as refugees in the present research study lived since May 1959 in the Darjeeling township situated in the Darjeeling district within the state of West Bengal. These refugees were Tibetans (those who fled from Tibet after 1959 and their heirs) who were far from leading a physically isolated existence. Regular bus services or hired vehicles connect Darjeeling town with Siliguri and the neighbouring towns of Kurseong, Kalimpong and Gangtok. Land Rovers are the most popular means of
transport as they can easily navigate the steep slopes in the region. Traveling to this site (by the 80 kms long Darjeeling Himalayan Railway from Siliguri or by the Hill Cart Road or National Highway 55 that follows the railway line) was not a difficult proposition, unlike a number of refugee camps around the world, which are situated in remote areas. However rail and road transport often gets disrupted during the monsoon season due to landslide. On arrival in Darjeeling town, the most favoured means of getting to the TRSHC was by walking down the winding hill slopes either from Chowrasta side or on the other end from the Hermitage or using two wheelers and hired taxis used more often by tourists.

Advice from several quarters before conducting field research among the Tibetan refugees was to procure a special letter or permit for entry into the Tibetan refugee settlement in Darjeeling from the Tibetan government-in-exile. The advice seemed appropriate at the early stages till contact with some members of the Tibetan community there had been established on an informal basis. I made it a point to find a rented accommodation at nominal cost near the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre (TRSHC). This was in the Hermitage area, overlooking the TRSHC where I stayed at one corner of a house whose owner was a Nepali Brahmin. He happened to be a friend of my first key informant who lived in the neighbouring Bhutia Busty area. I shifted to Bhutia Busty later on for I needed to get access to the Bhutia community which has propinquity with the Tibetan refugee community living in their midst. I stayed in the house of a Sikkimese Bhutia family near the Bhutia Busty monastery. This turned out to be a fortunate arrangement with some of my informants readily visiting me from in and around the area when I was not visiting them since the portion I was occupying was secluded and private. Some of my respondents accompanied me to restaurants, markets, streets and shops where conversations were generated.