CHAPTER-II

TIBETAN REFUGEES IN INDIA: CONTEXT AND EXPERIENCES

This chapter explores the context and experiences of Tibetan refugees in India. This includes the geo-political status of Tibet, its early history and the conditions of rehabilitation and resettlement in India. It explores the intra-group diversities with regard to religion, region, sect, gender and economic status existing amongst Tibetans in pre-1959 Tibet and post-1959 India. Taking 1959 as an important year that brought about a radical change in the lives of Tibetans and rendered them refugees, the study seeks to explore their conditions of refugeeism.

The Invasion of Tibet

Though the recorded history of Tibet can be said to have started much earlier, the turning point of Tibet's history is regarded as the year 1949, when the People's Liberation Army of the PRC first crossed into Tibet. After defeating the small Tibetan army and occupying half the country, the Chinese government imposed the '17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet' on the Tibetan government in May 1951 (Pragg cited in http://www.tibet.com/Status/statuslaw.html). The treaty provided for rule by a joint administration under representatives of the central government and the Tibetan government. Most of the populations of Tibet at that time were serfs, bound to land owned by lamas. The attempt at land reform or the redistribution of wealth, it seems, proved unpopular with the established landowners and a rebellion broke out, apparently “supported by the American CIA”. As resistance to the Chinese occupation escalated, the Chinese repression, which included the destruction of religious buildings and the imprisonment of monks and other community leaders, increased dramatically. It was crushed in 1959 (Pragg cited in http://www.tibet.com/Status/statuslaw.html).

Tibetan exiles claim that during this campaign, tens of thousands of Tibetans were killed and the Dalai Lama was forced to flee to India, setting up the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh. In 1963, the Dalai Lama promulgated a
constitution for a democratic Tibet. Isolated resistance continued in Tibet until 1969 when CIA support was withdrawn. Meanwhile, according to the Tibetan Government in Exile and Tibetologists, religious persecution, consistent violations of human rights, and the wholesale destruction of religious and historic buildings by the Chinese continues in Tibet. It is claimed that some 1.2 million Tibetans have lost their lives, (over one-sixth of the population) as a result of the Chinese occupation of Tibet (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Tibet_Independence_Movement).

**Geo-Political Status of Tibet**

There are two different versions of Tibet’s geo-political status held by the Tibetan Government in Exile in India and the Chinese government respectively. The PRC claims that “Tibet became an integral part of China 700 years ago” and that it rules Tibet “legitimately” (http://www.tibet.com/Status/statuslaw.html). The PRC considers all movements aimed at ending Chinese sovereignty in Tibet, starting with British attempts in the late 19th century and early 20th century, to the Government of Tibet in Exile today, as “one long campaign abetted by malicious Western imperialism aimed at destroying Chinese integrity and sovereignty”, thereby weakening China's position in the world (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Tibet_Independence_Movement).

It is noted that the PRC also points to the “autocratic and theocratic policies” of the Government of Tibet before 1959, as well as its “renunciation of Arunachal Pradesh”, claimed by China as part of Tibet occupied by India, and its “association with India”. and claims that the Government of Tibet in Exile has no moral legitimacy to govern Tibet (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Tibet_Independence_Movement).
MAP 1.1 TIBET BEFORE 1959

(Source: http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/history/glance.php)
The Government of PRC, it seems, also rejects claims that the “lives of Tibetans have deteriorated”, pointing to “rights enjoyed by use of Tibetan language in education and in courts”. It claims that the lives of Tibetans have “improved immensely” compared to the Dalai Lama’s rule before 1950.

The Cultural Revolution and the cultural damage it wrought upon China is generally condemned as a nationwide catastrophe. The ‘China Western Development Plan’ is viewed by the PRC as a “massive, benevolent, and patriotic undertaking” by the eastern coast to help the western parts of China, including Tibet, “catch up” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Tibet_Independence_Movement).

In contrast, studies state that the Tibetan Government in Exile views the current PRC rule in present-day Tibet or TAR\(^2\) (Tibet Autonomous Region) as “colonial and illegitimate”, motivated solely by the natural resources and strategic value of Tibet, and in “gross violation of both Tibet’s historical status as an independent country and the right of Tibetan people to self-determination”. It also points to PRC’s “autocratic”, “divide-and-rule” and “assimilationist policies of Chinese imperialism” that are seen as “bent on destroying Tibet’s distinct ethnic makeup, culture, and identity” (http://www.tibet.com/Status/statuslaw.html).

Studies note the Government of Tibet in Exile’s claims that millions of Chinese immigrants to the TAR are “diluting the Tibetans both culturally and through intermarriage” and that the traditional Tibetan way of life has now irrevocably changed. Claims have been made that despite reforms that have granted religious freedom after 1980, monks and nuns are still being imprisoned and continue to flee Tibet (http://www.drapchi14.org/drapchi14/). Projects that the PRC claims to ‘benefit Tibet’, such as the ‘China Western Development economic plan’ or the ‘Qinghai-Tibet Railroad’

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1 Benefits that are commonly quoted by PRC include: the gross domestic product (GDP) of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) today is 30 times that before 1950; TAR has 22,500 km of highways, as opposed to 0 in 1950; all secular education in TAR was created after the revolution; TAR now has 25 scientific research institutes as opposed to 0 in 1950; infant mortality has dropped from 43% in 1950 to 0.66% in 2000; life expectancy has risen from 35.5 years in 1950 to 67 in 2000; the collection and publishing of the traditional “Epic of King Gesar”, which is the longest Epic poetry/epic poem in the world and had only been handed down orally before; allocation of 300 million Renminbi since the 1980s to the maintenance and protection of Tibetan monasteries (http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20011108/3.htm).

2 “The Tibetan exiles have always alleged that present-day TAR is smaller than the Tibetan regions first occupied by China. According to them, a part of the Tibetan territory was separated by the Chinese after occupation and merged with adjoining provinces. What was left was named the TAR” (Raman cited in www.phayul.com/news/articles).
and the more recent opening of the world’s highest railway linking China to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, have been termed as politically motivated actions to consolidate central control over Tibet by facilitating militarization and Han Chinese migration. The money funneled into cultural restoration projects are claimed to be aimed at “attracting foreign tourists”. It is claimed that preferential treatment is still awarded to Han Chinese in the labor market as opposed to Tibetans (http://www.drapchi14.org/drapchi14/).

Flight and Re-Settlement in India

The Tibetan refugees in India, as mentioned in the first chapter, form one of the largest refugee groups in South Asia. Their population in India is estimated at 110,000 (www.unhcr.org). The first batch of 85,000 Tibetan refugees crossed over into India in March 1959, with the Government of India granting asylum to their spiritual and temporal leader, the Dalai Lama. The primary reasons, which forced the Tibetan refugees to cross over to India in 1959, as also in subsequent years are stated to be cases of “religious persecution, torture, forced sterilization, destruction of families (with Tibetans apparently being forced to marry the Chinese etc) and confiscation of property” (www.tibet.com/humanrights/edu/today). To this list may be added ‘dissatisfaction with the manner in which their children are being educated in Tibet’, which seems to be one of the major reasons why Tibetan children are “smuggled” into India every year.

A mix of geopolitical considerations as also moral and humanitarian concerns are seen as reasons for the ‘special treatment’ of Tibetan refugees by the Government of India, in comparison to other groups of refugees in India, as mentioned before.

3 The 1,142 km rail track across Tibet is said to “improve the lives of Tibetans and promote the region’s traditional culture”. It was stated, “Tibetan culture needs to move forward and spread, and to do that it needs contact” (Zhensheng cited in Hindustan Times, 30/06/06, Delhi). Overseas groups demanding Tibet’s autonomy state that, it will “spur an influx of ethnic Chinese migrants threatening to displace Tibetans in their own homeland”, thus, “diluting their own culture”. Environmental critics hold that it will threaten fragile highlands, and add to global warming. China dismissed these criticisms (Hindustan Times, 30/06/06, Delhi). Tibetans in India have protested against the new train, which Beijing promises will bring “greater economic development” (Hindustan Times, 05/07/06, Delhi).
This special treatment is despite the fact that the Government of India considers Tibet as “an integral part of China” (Singh 1997:5) and has also not provided recognition to the Tibetan Government in Exile with its headquarters in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh. Asylum was granted to the Tibetans by the Government of India due to widespread sympathy in India for the Tibetan cause mainly due to India’s cultural affinities with Buddhist Tibet (it was from India that Buddhism had spread to Tibet). Geopolitical considerations also played an important role with welfare assistance being provided by the Government of India “as compensation” for Nehru’s “political inability to do anything for Tibet” on the eve of its invasion by China (Norbu 2001:209). “Differential and preferential treatment” of the community has also been attributed to their “political and strategic importance to India in relation to China” (Raj 1999: 86).

Although Tibetans are considered as foreigners under the Foreigners Act, 1946, they have been accorded the basic rights of most citizens (except the right to contest or vote in Indian elections). They have been “issued certificates of identity, which enables them to engage themselves in gainful employment, economic activities and to even travel aboard and return to India” (Chimni 2000:496). Those Tibetans, “who migrated to India before March 1959 and who have been ordinarily resident in India since then, are considered for Indian citizenship on an individual basis. Those married to Indian nationals may apply for Indian citizenship” (UNHCR report 2002:63).

Studies suggest that the influx of the Tibetan refugees to India took place in a sudden and overwhelming manner without sufficient planning or preparation, with most of the refugees having left Tibet in a state of panic and confusion. Only a small number managed to bring along their families with them. On the way, many children died of the hardships in crossing the mountains, while a great many got separated from their families. The refugees suffered from physical and emotional exhaustion after negotiating the highest mountains and valleys in the world. Most of them had left their homes empty-handed and had no means to sustain them. The provision of emergency distress relief under such circumstances was the first demand of the situation that the organizers of the relief operation faced. The problem, it seems, was not only the “suddenness” with which the problem occurred but also the “human dimension” that had to be grappled with (Saklani 1984:223).
The problem of relief organization, it seems, was further complicated by the limitations imposed upon the Government of India by its own diplomatic position on the Tibetan issue. India had conceded the Chinese claim of suzerainty over Tibet years before the Tibetan refugee influx took place and had not subsequently changed that position. Despite this fact, however, India condemned the Chinese violation of human rights in Tibet and their failure to live up to the promise of regional autonomy to the Tibetans. India gave asylum to the Tibetans on 'humanitarian grounds', as mentioned before, and also said that the Dalai Lama was, "free to carry on his religious activities in India" but also added that "neither the Dalai Lama nor the Tibetans could carry on political activities from the Indian soil" (Nehru's speech in Parliament on 20th April 1959 cited in Saklani 1984:223).

This ambivalent diplomatic position, it seems, set a curb on the Government of India with regard to receiving any other government's help for the relief and rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees. Additionally, Indian economy at the time, it seems, was also in a "critical state with her resources being severely outstretched to meet such as serious and unforeseen contingency" (Saklani 1984:223). Non-official relief organizations were the "only alternative" and so the 'Central Relief Committee for the Tibetan Refugees' was set up in India. The Tibetan cause received very little political support from the world governments though it aroused widespread sympathies in the non-communist countries. A very large number of NGOs and religious charities associated with different churches came forward to help Tibetan refugees from countries like UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and South Vietnam. The main burden, it seems, however, fell upon India (Saklani 1984:223).

On the request of the Dalai Lama, the refugees were shifted to cooler places in the hilly areas, where they were given employment on road construction projects. Quick and satisfactory economic rehabilitation, however, was a difficult task as a majority of the Tibetan refugees were unskilled peasants and herders. The refugees had to live an unsettled life in temporary sheds or ordinary tents that was very hard on them (Saklani 1984:223).

In the earlier stages, it seems the uncertainties about the future of Tibetan refugees and the indefinite position of their leadership led to temporary rehabilitation programmes.
All hopes of the pressure of international opinion making the Chinese relent, ebbed out with the worsening in Sino-Indian relations, in which the Indian attitude towards the Tibetan refugees became one of the important causative factors. The Chinese aggression against India in 1962 dashed hopes of a quick return of the refugees to their homeland. The state governments’ of Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Sikkim, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, thus, set up agricultural settlements for the refugees. These agricultural settlements were “deliberately designed in such a way as to recreate Tibetan society with it’s core values intact” in keeping with the popular desire and determination of the refugees which was endorsed by the Government of India as a matter of policy (Norbu 2001:205). These settlements have, it seems, developed into “full-fledged communities”, looking after the needs and requirements of families. The refugee communities in these settlements have built monasteries and other community institutions. They have given “Tibetan names and styles to their settlements, localities and institutions and organizations” which reflects upon their “strong nostalgic memories and demonstrates their strong patriotic spirit” (Saklani 1984:232). At present, there are 52 Tibetan settlements in South Asia: 35 in India, 10 in Nepal and 7 in Bhutan. There are 24 agricultural settlements, 16 Agro-industrial settlements, 10 handicrafts based settlements alongwith individual settlers all over the country (www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_conf07Paljor.ppt).

To aid the process of socio-economic adaptation of the refugees, production and training industrial and handicraft centers, suited to the aptitudes of Tibetans like woolen mill, tea plantation, carpet weaving, painted scrolls etc were set up in Sikkim, Darjeeling, Dharamsala, Simla, Dalhousie, Dehradun etc with the aid of the Government of India. These products are in great demand in Indian and foreign markets. The Tibetan establishment also provided ‘white-collar’ jobs to educated Tibetans in its administration as a “training ground for an administrative elite, which Tibet entirely lacked in the past” (Saklani 1984:236). It is, thus, observed that the traditional structure of power and authority were retained with the old aristocracy and religious hierarchy managing to retain their old positions. Large numbers of men and women, also took to independent trade and hawking business showing enterprise and even “monopolizing” the trade in woolen garments in various parts of the country (Saklani 1984:236).
Rehabilitation of children (details given in third chapter), it seems, was a major area of concern for the Dalai Lama. Welfare institutions for them and for the old and infirm were set up along with creches, hospitals, health centers and clinics in refugee settlements with the help of international aid.

Thus, to a large extent, the refugee relief and rehabilitation work was largely successful with the condition of the refugees being described as even “better and happier than a great bulk of the common Indian masses” (Saklani 1984:242).

**Host-Refugee Relationship: Socio-Economic Aspects:** studies on refugee groups suggest that a refugee influx into a host country generally raises concerns that it will exacerbate existing problems of overcrowding, poverty, unemployment and xenophobia. Existence of Tibetan refugees in India has also, from time to time led to conflicts between the locals and refugees. Such conflict however, seems to have been of a regional nature, limited largely to the cis-Himalayan regions where a number of racial, linguistic, religious, cultural commonalities are shared between the Indians and Tibetans, with host-refugee tensions seemingly being absent in the plains of India (Palakshappa cited in Norbu 2001:221).

As the “successful outsider”, Tibetan refugees who have been economically ‘successful’ have also been the object of outsider agitation in 1994 in the Himalayan regions of Khemeng, Arunachal Pradesh, where posters with slogans like, “Get back to your own country” and “Dogs and Tibetans are not allowed in India”(Datta and Chakraborty 2001:261) appeared in Highways calling for their expulsion. In Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh also there were some problems between the local youth and Tibetans (Stobdan cited in Norbu 2001:221) along with in Ravangla, Sikkim, where there were some cases of friction with Tibetans being victimized, ostracized and even evicted (Dhondup 1994:20).

Such conflict, however, seems to have been largely of a regional nature, limited to a few instances only. One of the major reasons why actual cases of host-refugee conflict have been relatively rare in India seems to be due to the fact that the local population has received several side-benefits with the establishment of Tibetan settlements in remote areas and the extension of welfare facilities in these areas, previously neglected by the government. For instance, schools and hospitals established in these regions are open to
the local population. The Tibetan agricultural settlements largely employ rural Indian labourers and local Indians are also employed by Tibetan refugees to assist in their secondary occupation of selling woolens in winter, running of restaurants, hotels etc (Norbu 2001:221; Klieger cited in Anand 2000:276). Also, the motorable roads in the interior regions of Shimla, Kulu-Manali etc were constructed with the help of Tibetan labour (Dhondup 1994:18).

In this context, Saklani’s study (1984) can be referred to as she notes that 76:92 per cent of Indians’ have a ‘positive attitude’ towards Tibetans, while 85 per cent of Tibetans have a positive attitude towards Indians in India (Saklani cited in Norbu 2001:222).

Intra-Group Diversities

Tibetans tend be seen as a homogenous group of people. Studies suggest that intra-group differences, however, existed amongst them in Tibet, before the exodus to India and some of these differences continue to exist even in exile. This section explores the socio-cultural, religious and economic conditions in Tibet and the existence of intra-group differences amongst the Tibetans in the pre-1959 period in Tibet as well as in the post-1959 period in exile in India. For, only after such pre-migration conditions of the Tibetan refugees have been explored, that post-migration circumstances and more specifically, linkages and implications with education can be analyzed.

Religion: studies refer to the fact that for centuries, Lamaist Mahayana Buddhism exerted a major influence in Tibet until 1951, when Communist China annexed Tibet and overthrew the old religious order. Henrich Harrer has referred to the all-pervading influence of religion on the lives of Tibetans in Tibet (see box)

"Pious texts were constantly on the lips of Tibetans. The religious rituals were an inalienable part of their lives. The prayer wheels were constantly turned and the prayer-flags waved on the housetops, and the mountain passes and the tree-tops. The religious symbolism pervaded their consciousness. To the Tibetans, the rain, the wind, the majestic snow-covered peaks, in short all the phenomena of nature were the various aspects of the godly presence. The divine anger as the Tibetans believed, was manifested by the hailstorm and benevolence, by the fruitfulness and the fertility of the land. The life of the people was regulated by the divine will, whose interpreters were the lamas" (Harrer cited in Saklani 1984:132).
In traditional Tibetan society, the individual as well as the nation are said to have taken refuge in the “three precious gems”, i.e. ‘Buddha, Dharma and Sangha’. The fourth refuge was the lama, who symbolized all the three. Further, there was a “protective deity, in accordance with the Mahayana belief, whose secret oracle was supposed to guide the destiny of the country” (Saklani 1984:138). It was this high degree of conformity, which the Chinese ideology apparently tried to undermine through “mass education” techniques and “brain-washing” and yet found difficult to break. The final attack on the lamas led to shock and anguish with a large number of Tibetans fleeing the country and following their ‘god-king’, the Dalai Lama to India. It is observed that they fled “to save their religion” and to keep alive the “traditional mode of life” as also to “escape the horrors of persecution” (Saklani 1984:138).

On coming to India, one of the first major concerns of the refugee community, was to rehabilitate the monastic community and to preserve and foster the pristine religious and cultural heritage of the Tibetans. To ensure this goal, monasteries, religious and cultural institutions were established, as mentioned in the Introduction (see details in annexure: 8.1). Scholars refer to the “remarkable initiative and creativity” shown by the refugees within a very short period of time, in holding on to tradition and recreating their “religio-social life anew on the Indian soil” (Saklani 1984:153). At the same time, however, the “declining religiosity” of the younger generation is referred to, with them becoming, “individualistic” and “materialistic” (Saklani 1984:148). A decline in the tradition of family members being sent to monasteries is also referred to. In Tibet, usually one member of the family from each generation joined the monastic order- this practice seems to have been largely discontinued in exile.

An important fact that needs to be noted here is that though a great majority of Tibetans are Buddhists, there are followers of other faiths also amongst them, for example, the Tibetan Muslims. After the Tibetan Uprising against the Chinese rule in 1959, the Tibetan Muslims, alongwith the Tibetan Buddhists, it seems, also decided to opt for India on the basis of their “Indian (Kashmiri and Ladakhi) ancestry to escape Chinese tyranny” and were rehabilitated in Srinagar, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Gangtok in India (Mondal 2001:243). Schools were, it seems started for the Tibetan Muslim refugee children in these settlements to provide “modern and traditional education”.

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Some of them were also sent to Central schools set up for the Tibetans elsewhere in India (Mondal 2001:247). While many of the Tibetan Muslim refugees have become naturalized citizens of India, they seem to still cultivate, both the Tibetan as well as Islamic knowledge and thereby have maintained their “distinct identity” which needs to be recognized (Mondal 2001:248).

Apart from Tibetan Muslim refugees, there are also Christian Tibetan refugees who seem to have “permanently settled down” in places like Kalimpong and Darjeeling in West Bengal in India. Their roots can be traced to the period before the Chinese entered Tibet, when Christian missionaries had functioned in East Tibet (Srinivasan 1977:4). As the importance of religion in the lives of the Tibetan people in exile cannot be disregarded, this issue has been explored through the perspectives of respondents in the study.

**Regions and Sects:** regional as well as sectarian differences seemed to exist amongst Tibetans in Tibet prior to its occupation in 1951. One of the most divisive problems experienced by the Tibetan groups has been, it seems, regional factionalism exacerbated by dialect differences and the proximity, while still in Tibet, to opposing geopolitical centers of influence-Lhasa or China in particular. Whether regional differences in their native country also have had an impact upon their lives in India, seems to be a notable issue.

Studies suggest that there were three major regions in Tibet prior to the Chinese occupation: U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo. Being separated from each other by large distances, these regions were bound together not so much by the presence of a common political authority as by the presence of similar cultural, religious and ethnic bonds (Grunfeld 1987; Anand 2000; Liang 1999). Sectarianism, on the other hand, it seems, was not present in Tibet, as low population density and remoteness of one center from another made it possible for each of the four major sects to co-exist without threatening the others’ area of influence (Nowak 1978:69).

Exile is said to have brought about closer contact, which highlighted differences of interpretations and also brought about an “inter-sectarian awareness of the other’s relative strength” (Liang 1999: 20). This promoted a competitive attitude “aggravated by western devotees seeking a very un-Tibetan “one true sect” (Nowak 1978:69).
Differences amongst the people of these three regional groups in exile have been referred to, especially with regard to their lobbying for greater participation in the Tibetan administration in exile (Grunfeld 1987:197).

There was, however, realization of the need to prevent sectarian and regional differences and to give priority to national identity for the collective cause of Tibet. This led to a public relations campaign to stress harmony and unity amongst the sects as also amongst people from different regional backgrounds of Tibet. This campaign seemingly worked to reduce the importance of sectarian and regional differences amongst Tibetans in exile (Nowak 1978:69).

As the Tibetan community has settled down in different places all over India, regional differences have also emerged over a period of time amongst them. Interviews with respondents in the study throw light on the existence of some differences (along with similarities) in lifestyles between Tibetans from places in North Eastern India and those from the rest of the country. Many of the Tibetans settled in the north-eastern regions of India, for instance, who arrived in the country much before the Dalai Lama’s escape to India in 1959, are not regarded as refugees because of their having been granted naturalization by the Government of India. Despite being Indian citizens, however, these families continue to prize their Tibetan roots and identities. Whether regional differences in their native country as well as regional differences in India, has had an impact upon schooling and other life experiences in exile, therefore, seems to be an interesting issue and is explored in the fourth chapter.

**Gender Differences:** With regard to the position of the Tibetan women in exile as also in Tibet, Tibetologists largely seem to believe that the Tibetan women share a position equal to that of men. One of the earlier accounts of the position of women in pre-1959 Tibet is by Rin-chen Lha-mo or Louis King, a woman belonging to the eastern region of Tibet, Kham who had married an Englishman (formerly British Counsel on the Chinese frontier of Tibet). In this account, she refers to their egalitarian status (see box).
"With us neither the one sex nor the other is considered the inferior or the superior. Men and women treat each other as equals. The women are not kept in seclusion, but take full part in social life and in business affairs. Husband and wife are companions and partners but the husband is the head of the household. ..the wife manages the household. The family decides its affairs as a whole". "The Tibetan woman from her childhood learns to be useful and self-reliant and capable. She is at ease with men, for she has mixed with them, with her brothers and boys in general, on an equality from the start". The women of Tibet are "strong and capable, and you cannot safely ignore them as of little account". "They are not ignored at all, but exercise great influence in all walks of life" (Lha-mo 1926:128).

Sir Charles Bell in 1928 also referred to the Tibetan women holding authoritative positions in the government of their country (see box).

"When a traveler enters Tibet from the neighboring nations in China or India, few things impress him more vigorously or more deeply than the position of the Tibetan women. They are not kept in seclusion, as are Indian women". "The Tibetan woman is ...physically strong; undeniably intelligent". "They are active and shrewd in commercial matters. Most of the shops are kept by them" (Bell 1928:156).

Other studies also refer to women exercising much influence in Tibet, both in the household and in business (Macdonald 1978; Moraes cited in Saklani 1984). At the same time, however, the limited power women had in religion and politics has also been referred to (Bell 1928; Macdonald 1978; Saklani 1984). Education amongst Tibetan women in Tibet also seems to have been rare. While girls from noble families and from a few urban areas did receive education, the opportunities were fewer for them than for boys. It is observed that only girls of the official and business classes were taught the rudiments of writing, reading and arithmetic, "to enable them to do ordinary household accounts, and to keep the books of a small trading concern" (Macdonald 1978:135). The poorer womenfolk and those of the peasantry, it seems, received no schooling at all. While there was no restraint on girls attending school, it seems it was “custom to keep a girl at home” and to teach her “primary roles of wives and mothers to manage the household” (Erapeni 2004:59). There were also, it seems, some regional differences in the status of women, as women from the Amdo region of eastern Tibet had a “relatively low status, most probably due to the conservative Chinese influence which was maximum in Amdo for centuries altogether” (Saklani 1984:102).
With regard to the position of the Tibetan women in exile, as mentioned before, Tibetologists largely seem to hold the view that women share a position equal to that of men. Tsering observes, “it must be noted that Tibetan women in general, both in Tibetan and in exile, participate in life activities at par with men” (Tsering 1986:16). Statistics on the school enrollment and drop-out rate of Tibetan girl children in India, also seem to be rather positive. Male-female enrollment ratio is shown as currently around 100:95, with the average school drop-out rate being approximately 9% (Rikha cited in www.tibet.com/govt/doe.html).

At the same time, however, it is also observed that women are lagging behind in relation to education and professional employment due to “social pressures” and being “conditioned from childhood to consider themselves inferior” (Tsering 1986:16). It is observed that Tibetan women lack educational and vocational aspirations commensurate with their potential or in comparison to their Indian or western counterparts.

This paradoxical situation which regards the position of Tibetan women as equal to that of men, yet lagging behind them in the educational and professional sphere, seems to be of importance. The fact as to whether the burden of ‘being Tibetan’ is greater on Tibetan girls rather than boys also needs to be explored as it may have implications for their education and life-chances in the country.

As against the general perception that Tibetan women share an equal position with men in their society, Barbara Nimri Aziz observes that while men are addressed as “khyo-ga”, or “skye-pa” signifying adult or manhood, the common term used for women in Tibet and amongst Tibetans living in exile is “skye-dman”, the literal meaning of which translates as “born low”. Aziz notes that “if language has any social significance at all, these terms should alert us to a serious gender difference in Tibetan culture, one that places the woman in an equivocally inferior position” (Aziz 1990:12).

A “subtle form of women’s disadvantage” also seems to exist with all high public economic, social and artistic positions in exile being concentrated in men and women being employed only for low-level clerical jobs. The general argument given for this is that “there are simply not many capable women around” (Erapeni 2004:99). In the field of art, for example, Thangka painting, once reserved exclusively for males, is still a male-dominated art, with only a few women being allowed to take it up (Erapeni 2004:100).
Discrimination in the religious sphere is also referred to. Out of the thousands of reincarnations recognized by the Buddhist tradition, only three women, it seems, have been ‘found’. In exile, girls are still not selected as teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. It seems that there are “only 10 nunneries in exile compared to almost 200 monasteries” and that nuns face accommodation problems “in small, overcrowded nunneries with little or no facilities at all” (Erapeni 2004:102). A slight improvement, however, is said to have taken place in the status of the nuns in recent years. Nuns now have the opportunity to learn and excel in the practice of Buddhist debate as well as the possibility of attaining the position of Geshe (Doctor of Buddhist Philosophy)-the highest academic achievement in Buddhist studies (Erapeni 2004:102; Hindustan Times, Delhi, 9th December, 2005).

To understand the views of Tibetan youth on gender and gender discrimination in their community, interviews were held with respondents in the study. Most of the respondents denied the existence of gender discrimination in their community saying that the ‘clearest indication’ for lack of gender discrimination in Tibetan society is the presence of women entrepreneurs in garment shops and the sweater business. They also referred to their own cases saying that they had never heard of nor faced gender discrimination. There were some who said, however, that gender discrimination does exist, even though it is ‘not blatant’ in nature. 19/30 of respondents said that there is “no gender discrimination” in Tibetan community in exile or that it is “lesser than in Indian society”. 11/30 of the respondents however, said that a “subtle” form of gender discrimination exists in Tibetan community in exile. This ‘discrimination’, they said, exists, with boys being considered “higher” and girls being required to stay at home and do the cooking, washing, cleaning etc. Respondents said that there is no dowry system but “girls families”, it seems, “have to give clothes, jewellery etc to the boys’ families during a marriage, as it is supposed to be good, if you give”. “Even poor families will give what they can” (Pasang, T.S, 2006). A respondent pointed to religion as an example of gender discrimination with beliefs in the community that “only men can attain enlightenment” and raised the question as to why there is “no female Dalai Lama” (Phungkhang, N.T.S, 2006). Another respondent said that there is gender discrimination “in the way boys are allowed to wear western outfits during formal occasions” while for girls, it is “not considered good” if they do not wear chubbas (which was said to be
relatively uncomfortable as compared to western outfits like Jeans etc) on such occasions (Kungsang, T.S, 2006).

Respondents also referred to many “superstitions” existing in the Tibetan community, for example, “girls are not supposed to borrow and wear clothes of boys, especially lowers” as they (after puberty) are considered to be “dirty” or polluting in nature (Dolkar, N.T.S, 2006). There are certain offerings called “cho” (food) to deities that “are mostly prepared by only men”, for the same reason. Also, “amulets” called “sisung” blessed by The Dalai Lama worn by Tibetan men in the army are supposed to lose their “invincibility” if touched by women (Tsering, N.T.S, 2006).

Thus, interviews with respondents in the study suggests that though gender relations in Tibetan community in exile are regarded as largely egalitarian, subtle differences may also exist in the status of women and men, that needs to be further explored in terms of the interlinkages between culture, education and identity.

**Class and Economic Status:** Studies suggest that Tibetan society was a stratified one with the people divided on the basis of class. Scholars like Grunfeld note the existence of an “overwhelming evidence of a highly stratified society with a huge gulf between the classes in former Tibet” (Grunfeld 1987:14). The Tibetan social structure, it seems, largely had two broad social classes: the nobility i.e. the landed aristocracy, which also held high government offices and the common people, besides the clergy, which formed another distinct class. Two factors, possession of land and religious status were the main bases of the socio-economic gradations and hierarchies. Distribution of land and holding of government posts was governed by tradition and feudalistic principles (Saklani 1984:166).

Parallels have also been drawn between the Tibetan social hierarchy and the caste system in India. Saklani refers to a ‘pollution principle’ causing two broad divisions, like *savarna* (privileged class) and *avarna* (under-privileged class) as in India, that existed in Tibetan society with persons engaged in certain occupations being subjected to a high degree of segregation (Saklani 1984:177). Norbu refers to butchers, hunters and blacksmiths, being known as ‘impure bones’. The “impure bones”, he observes, could not share meals with the rest of the community; they married within their own group, and their sons were not permitted to take up the monastic career. In addition, the
‘undertakers’ i.e. the disposers of cadavers were also regarded as “not only impure but also as untouchables” (Norbu cited in Saklani 1984:177).

Despite the “hierarchical patterning”, it seems, there was an atmosphere of “harmony” in the Tibetan society. Rahul Sankrityayan’s “failure to find any class conflict” despite finding “glaring contrasts between the rich and the poor statuses of the Tibetans” (cited in Saklani 1984:166) during his stay in Tibet, is a fact in point.

There are, however, references to class differences, having an impact on education in Tibet. It is observed that formal, secular education was the preserve of only the upper classes in Tibet, particularly prior to the advent of the Chinese secular schools. The wealthy would hire tutors and during the 20th century, send their children to India and Sikkim for an Anglo-Indian education at Christian missionary schools (Grunfeld 1987; Alam 2000).

Exile in India seems to have brought about social and economic mobility, with modern, secular education, no longer remaining the preserve of the upper classes (Alam 2000:186). Yet, according to some scholars, access to schools is not available to all Tibetan children in India. There are said to be “only a few schools in the agricultural settlements” with residential school costs being a “formidable expense for the average Tibetan family” (Grunfeld 1987:194). These conditions, it seems, do not affect the former aristocracy who continue to send their children to exclusive and expensive, private Anglo-Indian schools or aboard for their education (Grunfeld 1987:16). The fact that whether those who constituted the upper classes in Tibet, continue to have an upper hand in the educational sphere in exile, therefore, needs to be explored.

Studies refer to the major occupations of Tibetan refugees in India as: agriculture, carpet-weaving/handicrafts, sweater selling and other trades (Datta and Chakraborty 2002; Kumar 1995). Changes are also said to have taken place in their traditional occupational pattern, with agriculturists in native Tibet, switching over to business, while the rich and the nobility continue being inducted into the administration of the Dalai Lama’s Government in Exile (Datta and Chakraborty 2001:261). Due to the strains of population growth, decreasing yield from the soil and lack of adequate employment opportunities for the educated, young Tibetans, a majority of settlers are also said to depend on sweater selling, other petty business and employment outside the settlements (Kumar 1995:122). Some scholars have also addressed the problem of poverty in the
exile Tibetan community. Tenzin Sherab argues that “chronic poverty" while not being a major problem in the exile Tibetan community, still “needs to be addressed both at the theoretical level and in practical terms” (Sherab 2004:22).

There are references, however, that observe that the class system in exile has become more open, as mentioned above, with educational, professional and occupational skills and higher incomes (in place of land and wealth-ownership as in the past) having become the main determinants of social status. Despite some problems, thus, the Tibetan refugee community (as against other refugee groups in India) seems to have become largely self-reliant with the help of the Indian Government, foreign aid and community initiatives. Much has also been attributed to the role of ‘Tibetan entrepreneurship’, ‘work ethics’ and ‘organizational skills’ in the Tibetan economic success (Norbu 2001; Michael 1986). As compared to the initial plans for rehabilitation, the self-sufficiency achieved has even led to the Tibetan refugees being regarded as “one of the most successful refugee communities in the world” (Norbu 2001:206). It has also been observed that there is “100 percent school enrollment among the poorer section” in the settlements and that “at eight percent, the unemployment problem is almost negligible” (Sherab 2004:22).

This chapter, thus, throws light on the context and experiences of refugee life for Tibetan refugees in India. It throws light upon intra-group diversities existing amongst Tibetans in pre-1959 Tibet and at present in India. It has highlighted the fact that life in exile has brought about far-reaching changes in the spheres of religion, gender, region, sect, class and traditional occupation. These vast changes seem to have eroded the traditional bases of social stratification of refugees. Despite these changes, however, the Tibetan exile community also seems to have adapted to its alien surroundings. The chapter indicates that remnants of the past, however, also may continue to exercise their hold over the life of Tibetan refugees in exile.

The next chapter is an exploration of the links between the educational conditions in Tibet and the education of Tibetan refugees in India. Educational policies for Tibetan refugees in India have been analyzed in this regard.

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4 The Central Tibetan Administration defines poor as, “An individual or a family, who can be easily judged from the appearance that they are unable to fulfill their basic necessities of life. One who have neither enough income nor financial backup to enjoy minimum standard of living at present nor there is any chance of future improvement unless there is an intervention from outside”. Besides a set of four criteria is applied for the identification of the poor people in the settlements. They area) Old having no family support b) Too many children to support c) Young but chronically sick d) Unemployed youth (Sherab 2004:22).