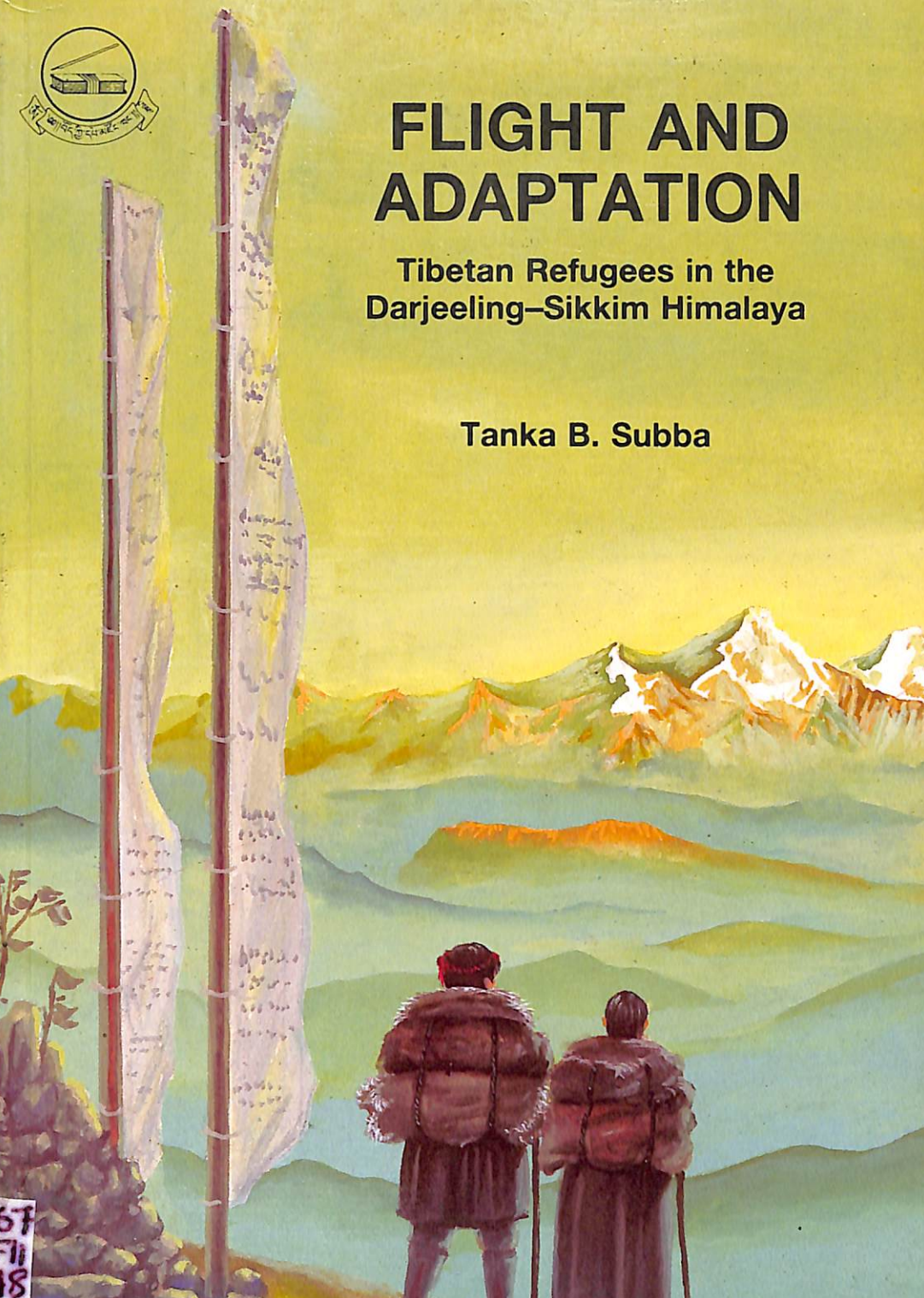




FLIGHT AND ADAPTATION

Tibetan Refugees in the
Darjeeling–Sikkim Himalaya

Tanka B. Subba



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by

Tanka B. Subba



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PREFACE

This book is the outcome of the first project that I undertook after joining the Centre for Himalayan Studies in March 1985. As a faculty member of 'area studies' centre especially established for studying Tibet and Bhutan, both of which are closed for intensive fieldwork-based researches by Indian scholars, one of my options was to study the Tibetan refugees. Though this study is conducted on the Tibetan refugees living within the Indian border it throws some light on the Tibetan society across the border as well. After all, a student of sociology is always more interested in people than places.

Apart from this official interest in them I had a personal interest too. Having grown up with some of these refugees, studied and lived with them, the zeal to learn more about them was very much there even before I landed up in the Centre where I am employed now. It was this zeal which pulled me through the usual depressions a researcher experiences. I also had to do a number of papers and a book in between, teach, and undergo the process of being a father. Without all this to take away a lot of my time I would probably have completed this project much earlier.

I started this work with a grant from our Centre sometime in the end of 1985 under the able guidance of Professor S.K. Chaube, the then director of our Centre. But before this project really took off, he left for Delhi University, leaving it upto myself to develop and mould it as my amateur mind dictated.

However, if I have shown some signs of maturity in this book the credit goes mainly to Professor Chaube who left behind some matured tips for me. I am also indebted intellectually to my colleagues in the Centre and other sister departments, who gave the best of their comments on the gist of the findings presented in this book. I owe special gratitude to Professor N.C. Choudhury, Shanti Swarup and Bani Prasanna Misra. I am also thankful to my friends, Prem K. Poddar and Amit Mitra, for ever stimulating me intellectually.

For helping me collect the data I am extremely grateful to my Tibetan friends and well-wishers like Ventrul Rinpoche and Penpa Tsering of Kalimpong, G.T. Gyaltshen of Gangtok, and Ngawang Phegyal of the Kunpheling Settlement, Ravangla, South Sikkim. I am also thankful to Tashi N. Phuntsok, Deputy Secretary of the Council

for Home Affairs of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for kindly agreeing to issue a letter of introduction to the Tibetan Welfare Officers. Without his letter my project would not have progressed an inch, as it involved fieldwork in a sensitive area and among sensitive people. And for helping me acquire this precious letter, Samphel and Tsering Tashi of Dharamsala are lovingly remembered. I must also acknowledge here with deep gratitude the kind permission given by Gyatsho Tshering, Director, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, for making the best use of the rich collection of materials in this unique library. Some of the issues of *The Tibet Journal*, which he gifted to me, were also very helpful for my purpose. Finally, I am grateful to all those Tibetan refugees in the region as well as outside, who patiently bore with my weird querrics.

Debi Prasad Boot, the Cartographer of our Centre, has always been of great assistance to me regarding maps. More rewarding than his dexterity in this job has, of course, been his friendly concern.

Ugen Chencho Lama, my colleague and friend, was always available for consultation. Many of his information have been incorporated here without formal acknowledgement.

Dawa Norbu, Associate Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, was also very kind to go through the handwritten first draft of this manuscript so meticulously and offer many suggestions. I could not think of a worthier friend than him to write the foreword to this book. And I am sure he had obliged a friend in the best spirit of a Tibetan and a scholar.

Finally, without the active cooperation of my wife, Roshina Gowloog Lepcha, the completion of this work would have definitely taken some more time. I also had with me the blessings of aged parents and the best wishes of my daughter, Taronia.

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May 9, 1989

The fleeing of the Tibetan nationals began with the Chinese invasion of the ethnic Tibet much before 1950 but their large-scale flight occurred only in April 1959, following the violent resistance made by them against the Chinese occupation of the political Tibet. About 80,000 people fled with their spiritual and temporal leader, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, in 1959. Thousands of them followed immediately or a little after through the same route which His Holiness used or some other routes. They began to pour into the border areas of India like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, throwing themselves completely at the mercy of Indian climate and hospitality.

Within a decade or so, most Tibetan refugees had been settled in different camps in India and only a few thousands remained to be settled. They were settled in groups of thousands in places like Dharamsala, Dehradun, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, and the Dajeeling-Sikkim Himalaya. Quite many of them were settled in Nepal and Bhutan also. And some of them were sponsored by individuals and organizations from abroad, particularly from Switzerland, Canada, Germany, and the United States of America.

Objectives

Under the circumstances, the most pertinent problem for study is their adaptation to the new physical and socio-cultural environments. They required to adapt not only physically but also economically and socio-culturally. Physical adaptation is not something temporary, as it is often supposed, but a continuous process like the other two forms of adaptation. All the three aspects of adaptation begin together but the process of social adaptation is more complex and take a longer time than the former two. This book, however, seeks to deal with economic and social adaptations only as the study of physical adaptation is not my cup of tea.

In this book an attempt has been made to underline the adaptive processes, the various stresses and strains involved in these processes, and how the refugees are coping up with all this without losing their sense of Tibetan identity. In this respect, it is pertinent to see how the physical, social and cultural landscape facilitate or inhibit their

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adaptive processes. What are the internal and external constraints operating behind their struggle for survival? How successful are they about all this and to what extent has their own socio-cultural system contributed towards it? What new challenges are cropping up and how are they facing them? Have they developed any ideological base rooted in the soils they are planted in?

These are some of the questions which the present book attempts to answer. An attempt has also been made here to make some generalizations about the Tibetan refugees as a whole, including those living outside India. Some crude theorizations have also been made here.

Are Tibetans Refugees ?

The refugee situation usually eludes all definitions. He is uprooted, homeless, and without a nationality; yet he may not be recognized as a refugee. And a person recognized so today may lose that status tomorrow even without any change coming in his life as such.

Louise W. Holborn defines 'refugee' as an "involuntary migrant, a victim of politics, war, or natural catastrophe"(Vol.13:362). Simple enough. But legally he is not a refugee unless he has crossed the international boundaries. And even if he has fulfilled this great condition he ceases to be a refugee if:

- a) he is earning a living and has found a permanent place to live;
- b) he has acquired a new nationality; and
- c) both conditions are fulfilled.

Carlile A. Macarthey defines a refugee as any person "who under the *stress of force majeure* has left his home and become dependent on the hospitality of others" (Vol.13:200).

There is not much difference between these definitions. A refugee is basically an involuntary migrant who has left his country under situations beyond his control. But the refugee situations have grown so complex in the last few decades that no definition is completely satisfactory. For instance, there are many Tibetan refugees in India, who are "earning a living" and have "found a permanent place to live" and thus have ceased to be refugees. Nor do they now fully justify the definition of Macarthey because many of them are not "dependent on

the hospitality of others".

But this is not why Paul Hartling, former Prime Minister of Denmark and the present United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, does not recognize the Tibetans as refugees. This is at least not revealed in his reply to the question of Tibetan refugees raised at a conference organized in May 1983 by the Ockenden Venture and the All Party Committee on Refugees. When asked about their status he simply said: "The Tibetans are not refugees... Just because they have their country they are not refugees" (Shakya 1983:5).

This statement of Hartling seems to have done injustice to the definition of refugee given nowhere but in the 1951 Statute of the United Nations High Commission of Refugees. This Statute defines a refugee as any person who:

...owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who not having nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable, or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (ESS Vol.15:568)

Even if Holborn and Macartney may not be fully satisfied in regarding all Tibetan refugees as refugees, Paul Hartling has no reason whatsoever for not recognizing them as such. The above definition perfectly fits in the case of them. They are refugees even as per the Constitution defines refugees as those persons "who are outside their country and had valid objections to returning to their country and had not acquired new nationality" (Ghatate 1977).

It may also be noted, however, that there are many Tibetan refugees who themselves do not want to be called so (Methi 1985). There was an altercation in Ravangla town, South Sikkim, in 1986 between a Tibetan group leader and a Bihari shopkeeper over a remark by the latter that the former is a "refugee". But the clearest indication of their apathy for this term was seen in Mussoorie where the Tibetan Welfare Association submitted a memorandum in 1971 praying for Indian citizenship (Patriot 1971).

When asked about these incidences, the educated Tibetan refugees reply that this is because the term 'refugee' has assumed a derogatory sense in India. This term is reportedly used in the sense of a 'beggar'.

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While I agree on this point, I am inclined to believe that a large number of them sincerely want to be naturalised. It is chiefly the policy of the Dharamsala administration not to allow its people to be naturalised that has stood in their way. The reason forwarded by the spokesmen of this Administration is that such an act would doom their ideal of achieving independence for Tibet and jeopardise their existence as a distinct cultural group. No one is perhaps more aware of the magnitude of their problems and more concerned about the future of the Tibetan refugees than this Administration itself. Thus, if it feels that naturalisation is harmful to the cause of the Tibetans in India, the matter should perhaps end there.

The new connotation of a 'refugee' mentioned above is unfortunate but the Government of India can perhaps do little about what its vast masses feel about a small group of refugees. Otherwise, the Indian Government is found quite sincere about "the Magna Carta of the Refugees" formulated by the UNHCR in 1952, which makes it obligatory for countries to give them:

- a) the same status as other (foreign) nationals,
- b) same treatment as citizens regarding education, social security, taxes and other socio-economic rights, and
- c) a guarantee against discrimination on any ground (Ghatate 1977).

It should be pointed out at this juncture that the stand of the Government of India on them often appears ambivalent. For instance, according to a government notification they were declared 'foreigners' in 1962 since "the Tibet region of China has been declared foreign territory" (Stat 1962). So India did little despite her overt annoyance over China's not recognizing Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh as a part of Indian territory. But internally, the Government of India uses the term 'refugees' even with regard to the Tibetans and grants certain amount of money every year for them. It is also mandatory for every Tibetan to get a Refugee Travel Order whenever they leave stations.

In any case the word 'foreigner' is purely legal. According to the definition given in the Foreigners' Act, 1946 and the Registration of Foreigners' Act, 1949, a foreigner means "a person who is not a citizen of India". Accordingly the Tibetan refugees are also foreigners but it neither explains the conditions under which they had to flee their homeland nor does it depict their existing social and economic conditions. The other term which is occasionally used to refer to

them is 'asylees' but this term too smacks of political connotation and is in any case a weak substitute for the word 'refugee'. Thus, for nothing other than the span of the word itself have I chosen to use the term 'refugee' in this book while talking about the Tibetan peoples outside Tibet.

Adaptation: The Scope

It is surprising to note that hardly any of the scores of adaptation studies on refugees has begun with a proper discussion on what adaptation means or how the authors have understood it. Most of them have chosen the criteria randomly and in the process have sometimes included even those aspects which strictly do not fall under adaptation studies.

'Adaptation' is both a process and a 'state'. In biological sciences, it refers to change in the structure and function of an organism, which facilitate the growth and reproduction in given condition. The biological adaptation of animals also includes changes in instincts and reflexes, which are required for survival. The social scientists have borrowed this concept from them but used in slightly different senses as evinced in the definitions given below.

One of the least controversial definitions of 'adaptation' is given by G. Duncan Mitchell. He defines it as:

...the manner in which a social system, be it a small group such as the family, or a larger collectivity such as an organization or even a total society, like a tribal society, fits into the physical or social environment. (1979:3).

Our interest extends beyond the adaptation to physical environment. Yet the following definition given by H.P. Fairchild is interesting though a little controversial. He defines adaptation as:

That relation of a group or institution to the physical environment which favors existence and survival or the process, passive or active, of attaining, the same...sometimes improperly used in place of adjustment or accomodation to mean a favourable or advantageous relation of the individual to the group or the process of attaining the same. (1976:275).

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His definition thus differentiates 'adaptation' from 'adjustment' or 'accommodation', which, according to him, are positive and forward looking processes while 'adaptation' presumably has no such defined direction.

According to the above definition of adaptation Talcott Parsons has used this concept improperly because, to him, it does not mean mere adjustment to a given situation but also includes an effort to reach a more satisfactory state of affairs. To him, it is a kind of creativity and innovation (1977:297).

The way Parsons has conceptualized 'adaptation' brings us close to 'adjustment' and 'accommodation' as understood by Fairchild. But since the latter has serious objections to treating these concepts as same, let us see if they really differ.

According to Mitchell, 'adjustment' is a term:

...that is psychological rather than sociological, used by some social psychologists to refer to the process whereby an individual enters into a harmonious or healthy relationship with his environment, physical or social, but basically used by some sociologists to refer to a social unit, like a group of organization, accomplishing the same end. (1979:3).

And 'accommodation' is defined as a:

...state or process of adjustment to a conflict situation in which overt expressions of hostility are avoided and certain compensatory advantages, economic, social or psychological, are gained by both sides, while leaving the source of conflict unresolved and allowing the structural inequalities giving rise to minority subordination to persist. (1979:1).

It is indeed difficult to draw any line of distinction between these three related concepts. It is no adaptation if it does not ensure a "harmonious or healthy relationship" with the environment. Similarly, the question of adaptation does not arise at all if there is no "conflict situation" in the environment and is fairly agreed today that conflict is a part of the social system. There is all the more reason to have conflicts in an alien environment. Thus, while I would like to treat these three concepts as similar, I choose to use the term 'adaptation'

in this book because this is more commonly used though often without caring to define it.

'Adaptation' defined as a 'state' may be conceptually classified into 'partial' and 'total'. When a community or culture group remains within a given environment 'adaptation' is less likely to be 'total' for there is generally no need for it. But if it is thrown into a new environment, as it has happened with the Tibetan refugees in most parts of India and elsewhere 'adaptation', is likely to be 'total'. The environmental sanctions may often be too harsh to demand an all-round adaptation. Such a situation is usually faced by 'refugees', for unlike the 'residents' and even 'migrants', who have the time to make rational or irrational choices, the former is just plunged in. However, a situation requiring 'total' adaptation may arise even for a 'resident' population at the time of a catastrophe, war, or something like that.

Adaptation is also seen as a 'process' in which sense it is never 'total': to imagine so is fallacious because it is ever on going. It is in this sense that most social scientists would like to study it and some even claim to have done it. But given the limitations of synchronic study one cannot help but end up studying it as a 'state'.

Theoretical Framework

The flight of Tibetans to India and elsewhere has sparked a large number of studies. More than a dozen doctoral theses have already been awarded by various universities of the world and over a hundred scholarly articles published in English itself.

A major theme for most refugee studies all over the world, including those on the Tibetans, has been adaptation. But such adaptation studies have been mostly conducted on those refugees who are flung into a completely alien environment, both physically and socio-culturally. There is hardly any study worth the name which is conducted in a largely similar physical and cultural environment except a few on the Tibetan refugees.

Theoretically, adaptation is smoother if the new environment is physically and socio-culturally similar to that of native land. The time taken both by the refugees and the host members to develop friendship and acceptability is expectedly shorter than when the host people have an entirely different physical and socio-cultural environment. Communication problem may arise initially because the

spoken form of a language gets highly localized and even the Tibetan language spoken by a Khampa may be difficult for an Amdo to understand properly. But such hurdles soon get crashed down by the overpowering semblance of other socio-cultural features.

But mere physical and socio-cultural similarities are not enough. Sometimes the same properties may lead to certain undesirable consequences too. The adaptation may be so smooth that it may be better termed as 'assimilation' - a state where the traces of 'identity' are totally rubbed off. In adaptation, on the other hand, a society assimilates only to the extent it is essential to protect its identity.

By and large it is felt that such a situation is more congenial for the initial stage, covering a period of about ten to fifteen years. But the same situation may prove to be unhealthy in the long run. Let me illustrate this a little more in detail.

Physical and cultural similarities are helpful for a refugee because he does not have to struggle much for physical or cultural survival. The hazards of health and spiritual deterioration are minimal. Nor is he likely to arouse the suspicion of the local people. He is, on the contrary, likely to be looked upon as one of their members. But as time passes, and, if he succeeds in improving his lot considerably he becomes an eyesore. He begins to be treated as an adversary, having 'different' tradition and culture. Such developments are taking place all over the Himalayas today. Resentment, explicit or implicit, is being expressed against the Tibetan refugees not only in north India and Arunachal Pradesh but also in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas. The new identity in Sikkim known as 'Sikkimese Bhutias' is a case in point.

The settlement of the Tibetan refugees in the Himalayan border areas was certainly paying not only for the refugees themselves but also for the Tibetanised communities there. For instance, there has been considerable revitalization of the Buddhist ethos and beliefs after the Dalai Lama settled in India. But politically the region has become more sensitive. This has not only annoyed the Chinese authorities on the northern side of high Himalayas but also irked some local business communities who began to face greater competition after the refugees have settled there.

Exploring the two major dimensions of their adaptation economic and social - will probably help us immensely in understanding the roots of the developments outlined above.

A few words may be devoted here to the concept of 'social system'

as it has been understood by the sociologists. It basically refers to the interaction between individuals, groups, or institutions within a given situation. According to the Marxian theory the basic units of a 'social system' are socio-economic classes which interact for economic and political power. It is in this sense that the Tibetan social system has been understood and analysed by some scholars like Melvyn Goldstein (1986:79-112) and Eva Dargay (1982).

The more abstract concept of social system is developed by Talcott Parsons who defines it as:

...a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspects, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the 'optimization of gratification' and whose relations to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols. 1951:5-6).

Its major structural units are considered to be 'collectivities' and 'roles' and the major patterns of relationships linking these units are values and norms.

There is little work done using Parsons' theoretical constructions for reasons which are both ideological and practical. But the Marxian concept of social system, though less abstract, does not appear appropriate in a refugee situation. The refugees, by definition, are cut off from their traditional mode of production and they cannot be grouped into, at least initially, various socio-economic classes.

Therefore, the Marxian model is perhaps best suited to the study of social adaptation in Tibet itself, as the works of Goldstein and Dargay have amply proved it. But in a refugee situation the Parsonian model, though heavily criticized by Ralph Dahrendorf and Stanislaw Andreski for having ignored, among others, 'the conflict' aspect of social system, is perhaps most meaningful. However, the dissolution of the traditional socio-economic classes and their emergence as a single 'refugee class' and its impact on their social system needs a careful analysis.

Method

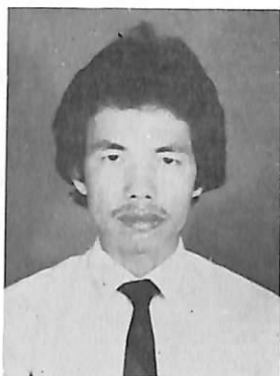
The present study is based on a sample of 80 households with 440

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persons picked up from three places of the region - Kunphenling Settlement at Ravangla (South Sikkim), Gangtok and Kalimpong. The total number of households from this settlement is 28 and the remaining households are from among the privately settled refugees of Kalimpong and Gangtok with 27 and 25 households respectively. The total estimated population of the Tibetan refugees in the region being about 9,000 the sampled population roughly constitutes 5 percent.

Sampling of the households in the Settlement is based on groups of households spread vertically along the slopes and of privately settled urban refugees in the basis of their horizontal spread along the road. Interviews are based on schedules though occasionally extra-schedule questions have been asked. Such interviewing has been done without the help of interpreters though an interpreter has always accompanied me. His main job was to introduce me to the people and explain my objectives to them. Since most refugees understand and speak Nepali or Hindi very well, my dependence on interpreters was considerably minimised.

The secondary materials are collected from various persons, library of North Bengal University and especially from the library of Tibetan Works and Archives at Dharamsala. The newspaper clippings preserved in the Centre for Himalayan Studies have also proved helpful.



Dr. Tanka B. Subba was born on 9 May 1957 in Kalimpong. He graduated from Kalimpong College and was awarded a Gold Medal for securing First Class 1st in MA. in 1980, and received his Ph.D. in 1986 for *Caste, Class and Agrarian Relations in the Nepalese Society of Darjeeling and Sikkim*. He is currently a Lecturer in Sociology at the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal.

Dr. Tanka Subba is the author of two other books, *The Quiet Hills* and *Dynamics of a Hill Society*, and is also a member of the Expert Panel of Review Projector (India), Coimbatore.

Forced to leave their country after it was invaded by China in 1959, about a hundred thousand Tibetans followed His Holiness the Dalai Lama into exile in India. Since then Tibetan civilization as a whole has been the subject of many studies. And studies on Tibetan refugees as socio-anthropological subject are many, but most of the earlier scholars have confined their studies on the Tibetans living in the settlements below the northern belt of the Indian sub-continent, which is physically, culturally, linguistically and climatically completely different from what is obtained in Tibet.

In this book the author makes an in-depth study of the adaptation process of the Tibetan refugees who started their exile life on the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, which is physically, culturally, climatically and linguistically, to a large extent, similar to what exists in Tibet, and shows that the process of rehabilitation and adaptation of Tibetan refugees in these areas has been less problematic than those in other parts of India. Very well researched and divided into eight well defined chapters, this book should be of immense help to the students of socio-anthropology and Tibetology.

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