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SURVIVAL OF A CULTURE

Tibetan Refugees in India

Franz Michael

Throughout human history there has always been a flow of persecuted and dislocated people. Today, in the age of totalitarianism, that flow has become a flood. In our time, millions have fled from reigns of terror in their homelands seeking refuge and a new life in another society and culture. Most have no other choice but to escape from intolerable threat and danger, to break with the bonds of their heritage and try to become part of a different national tradition, contributing some of their own values to the new country of their choice. For most of them, their past is gone, their life has changed under the pressure of new demands caused by the need for assimilation.

In that sense Tibetans who fled to India are not ordinary refugees. They have taken refuge not as individuals alone, but rather as a national polity that has escaped the destruction taking place in Tibet and has sought and been given the protective mantle of a neighboring friendly country. Both a people and cultural institutions have taken refuge in a host setting and have demonstrated both strength and survivability. That is the extraordinary and unique story of the Tibetans in India, a story that demonstrates the vitality of the Tibetan culture and of the people—the one hundred thousand who fled with their leader, the Dalai Lama, from Tibet across the Himalayas to the safety of a land with its own great religious tradition, a land originally the major source of Tibetan Buddhism. India, the land of Gandhi and the land where the Buddha once lived, was the best sanctuary Tibetan polity could have found. Clearly, the survival of Tibetan culture in the Indian diaspora is one of the wondrous and hopeful events of our time.

Twenty-six years ago, when the Dalai Lama arrived in India after his incredible escape from Lhasa over the high Himalayan mountain passes,

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followed by tens of thousands of exhausted, sick, and destitute Tibetan men, women, and children, seeking refuge after their futile uprising against the Chinese invader, few would have thought that here was the core for the continuance of an abiding, vigorous culture. The Tibetan story is an outstanding example of what faith and loyalty to one's culture can accomplish under great leadership: an almost miraculous recovery from a grievous, seemingly disastrous blow. In India, the Tibetan polity, its settlements, its enterprises, and its religio-political structure have not only flourished but have transformed and developed from the prototype in Tibet into an active part of the modern world. And in turn, this Tibetan survival in the diaspora has provided a beam of light and hope for the six million Tibetans remaining in Chinese-dominated Tibet and in the neighboring Chinese provinces politically cut off from the Tibetan heartland.

What made that survival possible? Unquestionably, major credit belongs to the Dalai Lama, whose clear understanding of the essence of Tibet's religious foundations and the meaning of its institutions, along with his great compassion, has enabled him to provide the leadership that united the Tibetans in exile, reconstituted their social and political organizations, and strengthened their faith and political will.

The Dalai Lama also impressed the leaders of the host country who, with their own experiences in a multiracial and multi-religious nation, showed exceptional understanding of the spiritual and social values of the cultural group they had welcomed into their land. The Indian government and people deserve great admiration for their courageous and generous support of the Dalai Lama and his people. Most of all, however, it was the inherent health, acumen, and profundity of the Tibetan Buddhist religious beliefs that had permeated Tibetan society in its homeland that were now capable of maintaining an equally strong bond under modern conditions in a totally different world.

This Tibetan culture has been little understood in the outside world. Between the fantasy tales of Shangri-la and the contempt for an assumed backward idolatry, there was little true evaluation of the relationship between religion and polity as it existed in Tibet. Although there had been some favorable accounts by visitors and diplomats, to most Westerners Tibet was a hopelessly antiquated, "feudal" world, an anachronism that could only be recast by a revolution. This misconception, nourished by the prevailing communist propaganda and doctrinal distortion of Tibetan traditional society, was based for the nondoctrinaire observer on an honest misinterpretation of the traditional Tibetan socio-political order.

As it was, Tibet had been, in spite of its policy of attempting to exclude foreign impact, a far more open, mobile, and evolutionary society than was generally realized. To begin with, Tibet was not "feudal" as has been so

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frequently stated. The numerically small aristocracy was a service aristocracy, not a territorial power. The common people—the *mi-ser*—were not serfs in the Western medieval sense, but subjects of the state, stratified into different levels of economically active groups. These were the *tsong-pa* in the towns, the traders and private entrepreneurs who could become very wealthy, and the *tral-pa* and *dü-chung* in the villages and nomadic camps. Only the *tral-pa*, slightly over half of the rural population, were obligated to stay in their communities and cultivate the land and tend the herds of the estates belonging to the government, the monasteries, and the aristocracy. They also owned their own land, which could not be sold but was inherited by sons. The *tral-pa* comprised the wealthy upper group of the villages and nomadic camps, furnished the local leadership of headmen and elders, and held a great deal of authority and responsibility within the community.

The *dü-chung*, making up 40% of the villagers, were landless laborers free to move and to accept work, and, in numerous cases, to engage in business activities as traders or organizers of transport. They also made up over 40% of the urban or town population. Most of the *mi-sers* in town and countryside were involved in some way with the trade caravans that linked towns and rural life, steppe nomads and agricultural settlements, and the country of Tibet with other Himalayan countries, India and China. The love of travel, so closely linked to the practice of pilgrimages to the holy places within and outside Tibet, had become characteristic of Tibetans of all strata of society. Within India today, Tibetans travel frequently and have become successful in trading their products and crafts throughout most of the country.

In the Tibetan society there was great social mobility, chiefly, but not exclusively, influenced by the fact that the monks, who became the leading group in government and society, were recruited from all social strata. Most of this religious leadership, including the incarnations, came from the lower levels of the social order in a selection process managed by the monks themselves. In a system of beliefs where each human being has his or her own karma, there was no religious justification for a caste or hereditary class society.

When this polity was transposed to India, some of the surface trappings of an older pre-Buddhist Tibet were simply discarded and the strength of the Tibetan tradition came to the fore. Owing to the permeating influence of Buddhism, the Tibetans were an educated people with a high level of literacy—my estimate is over 50%—and an education not only in religion but in other fields of basic knowledge as well. In Tibet, there had been no police and no military forces to speak of; there never had been any "peasant rebellions." The polity was held together by its religious faith, the

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strength of which was the most important asset the Tibetans brought to India.

The Tibetan economic order, always open to individual enterprise in commerce, production, and finance, with a flourishing agriculture and a growing middle class in the towns, held the promise and the potential for economic as well as social modernization, inherent within the Tibetan system itself. Tibetan Buddhism, in contrast to the medieval church in Europe, was open to economic enterprise, and was tolerant and fundamentally capable of transformation. This proved to be of crucial importance when the Tibetans had to survive in the new host land.

This interpretation of traditional Tibetan polity before 1959 differs from many recent accounts, even sympathetic ones, that stress mainly the mysterious and disparate cultural and religious tradition. Some theoretical academic ideas, such as the notion that modernization must be always dependent upon separation of church and state, are disproved by the Tibetan polity.

In the view presented here, Tibet was already on the way to modernization, but was impeded during the minority of a Dalai Lama by insufficient awareness by its monastic leadership of the urgency of the threat posed by an invader whose crude economic, social, and political measures interrupted the process and resulted in famine and disaster. The final proof, however, of the adaptability of Tibetan Buddhism and its polity to the demands of modern life is the success story of the Tibetan diaspora in India.

When transferred to India, the aristocratic service privileges and the various categories of *mi-ser* status were simply dropped without any question or even much attention, except perhaps for some comment by surprised observers about the ease with which these outdated forms had been done away with. When these surface residues of the pre-Buddhist past fell off, the true core of Tibetan Buddhist polity remained, to be reshaped by the Dalai Lama and his advisers into the religio-sociopolitical system that flourishes today in India.

Formulated in the preliminary constitution of 1963, drawn up in Dharamsala and intended to apply eventually to all of Tibet, this system creates in close parallel the structure of the institutions of the past, albeit in more democratic form. Because of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, the Indian government has not formally recognized the Tibetan leadership in India as a government in exile. The distinction is important from the point of view of international law, but does not affect the identity of what is in fact a nation in exile.

This nation in exile was rapidly established. At first living conditions in India were confused and miserable. Many died in the camps, and the ini-

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tial heavy and poorly paid road work with primitive tools took an additional toll. The climate in the Indian plains and jungle was deadly for people from the high mountain valleys. In one compound—a former British prison camp at Buxa near the Bhutanese border with a temperature range from 100 to 110 degrees—almost half of the 2,000 Tibetan monks died during the eight years the camp was used.

Soon, however, under the Dalai Lama's direction, the organization of a Tibetan polity in exile commenced. In 1960 he established the seat of this government in the north Indian hill station of Dharamsala. What is most important is that he remained both the religious and secular head of the Tibetan refugee community and was so recognized by India. As before, he held in "Personalunion" authority over civil life as well as over the structure and practice of the Tibetan Buddhist faith. If not a government of Tibet, his was clearly a government of the Tibetan community in India, and the dual structure that had existed in Tibet served with amazingly little modification the same purpose in India.

The tasks at hand were obvious. The first was taking care of the refugees, their survival, health, resettlement, and finding work and purpose for all. But the government in Dharamsala had a larger goal: to maintain the Tibetan culture, religion, and language; to educate the children; to preserve a Tibetan identity in exile; and to defend the Tibetan people's sovereignty through a democratic structure and to continue the struggle for freedom of the Tibetans remaining behind in their homeland.

Most of the Tibetan refugees, at least 80%, had been farmers or nomads. To settle them in communities of their own in India was one of the first successes of the Dalai Lama. He persuaded the Indian government to provide areas of uncultivated land of several thousand acres each in several states and regions of India where, with Indian help, the Tibetans were given ownership of about an acre per person. Bylakuppe, in South India near Mysore, was the first such settlement. Begun in 1960 with 700 settlers, it took two years of hard labor and the loss of many lives in the steaming climate to clear the jungle, fence the land for protection from elephants and other wild animals, and prepare the ground for the newcomers who arrived in groups of 500. Today the settlement has over 10,000 inhabitants in 18 villages and serves as a model for other settlements, more than 30 of them, spread over many parts of India, with a majority near the foothills of the Himalayas. Together they form a new home for over 70% of the exiled Tibetans. These settlements have been extraordinarily successful not only in agriculture but also in crafts and commerce, industry, and social institutions. The new agricultural staple crops of corn, wheat, dry rice, and oats differ from the former Tibetan basic staple of barley, but have proved successful both from the standpoint of Tibetan consumption

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and local sale. Production of a variety of vegetables and fruits, in addition to poultry raising and animal husbandry, has enriched the diet and the economy. Moreover, the settlements have become not only self-sufficient but financially prosperous by developing arts and crafts centers, stores and restaurants, workshops and garages. Schools, clinics, and homes for the aged and the sick have also been built. Tibetan crafts have become very fashionable in India, and with their traditional interest in trading Tibetans have sold their wares—sweaters, socks, and caps in strong colors—at good profit in Indian market towns all over the country.

Within the settlements are newly built temples and monasteries. The 15,000 monks who fled to India brought with them at least some books, religious objects, and art treasures saved from the destruction systematically applied by the Chinese to the religious monuments of Tibet. Those monks who survived the first grim years built monasteries in the settlements and at other Tibetan centers, recruited novices, and carried on the traditions of monastic life and care for their compatriots. The three great Gelukpa monasteries, Sera, Drepung, and Ganden, once the leading monastic academies in Tibet, were reestablished near settlements, and altogether more than 150 *gompas* (places of religious worship) were founded and filled with old and young monks. There are today more than 6,000 monks and 400 nuns among the Tibetan refugees, and 600 tantric masters carry on the teaching tradition.

Monastic life has, however, been incisively changed. Aside from studies and religious services, monks and nuns now work in the fields allotted to the monasteries to provide for their own food. They also work, as heretofore, as craftsmen and artists, so that they share in all phases of the life of the nation. Religion has thus remained the all-permeating cohesive factor of Tibetan life in India.

To carry this cultural and ethnic unity into the future, the most important concern of the Dalai Lama and his advisors has been the education of the young generation that survived the move to India. Many children perished from the extreme hardships of the flight; but many others lost their parents on the track or soon after arrival in India. To care for these orphans and for the many whose parents were destitute was the very first action taken by the Dalai Lama. A Council for Tibetan Education was founded, with a goal of rearing the young in both an Indian-Western curriculum and in traditional Tibetan culture, religion, and language.

The first school opened in March 1960 in Mussorie, North India. A nursery in Dharamsala became the Tibetan Children's Village, and in 1963 the Tibetan Homes Foundation was founded in Mussorie. These institutions became the models for others. So far, four other large boarding schools have been founded with an enrollment of more than 15,000 pupils,

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and some 50 all-Tibetan day schools follow the same program of combined Western and Tibetan education. For higher academic work, Tibetan students enroll in Indian or foreign universities, but in 1969 a special institute for higher Tibetan studies was opened at Varanasi in North India. In 1971 a Library for Tibetan Works and Archives was established in Dharamsala as a center for Tibetan manuscripts and literature and for research work. A Tibetan Medical Center followed, and a Tibetan Music, Dance and Drama Society has promoted and propagated artists and performed in India and abroad.

This cultural, social, and economic revival receives its political format from a structure that resembles in its basic institutions the religio-political system of the Tibetan homeland as it existed before the Chinese conquest but modified in accordance with contemporary concepts of a free, democratic order. As before, the Dalai Lama, whose authority continues to be derived from the belief in his Incarnation of Chenrezi (Avalokitesvara), an emanation of the Buddha's compassion shared and maintained by all Tibetans, retains his role as highest executive authority, decision maker, guide, and teacher of his people in both religious and secular matters. In his religious role the Dalai Lama heads not only the Gelukpa sect but also, by his charisma as much as tradition, the whole religious establishment, which perhaps is more united than it has ever been. This invisible authority concurs with a fully retained and recognized worldly authority that has enabled him to play his leadership role in rebuilding the hope and confidence of his people in exile, a role which has in turn been reaffirmed by the unique part he played in salvaging the Tibetan polity. His cabinet, the Kashag, appointed by him, now consists of seven instead of the former four ministers, and they no longer act in unison but divide the government functions into seven departments or ministries. These deal with religio/cultural affairs, internal affairs, education, health, finance, information, and security, and are the chief instruments of the Dalai Lama's central government. The highest democratic constituent of the government, the legislature, is the assembly of elected representatives of the exile community, standing for the three major regions of Tibet (Ue-tsang, Central Tibet; Kham, East Tibet; and Amdo, Northeast Tibet) and for the five religious orders (Gelukpa, Kagya, Nyingma, Sakya, and the pre-Buddhist Bon). Each region has two representatives and the religious orders one each, for a total of eleven, elected for a period of three years. This representative body is much smaller in number than the former General Assembly (Tshokdhu Gyezom) in Tibet, which had about 700 members, and it is therefore much more effective than its predecessor. A National Working Committee is the highest decision-making body, consisting of these eleven elected representatives, the ministers and one representative each of the

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seven government departments. It corresponds to the former Working Committee of the General Assembly in the importance of its functions.

The heads of the settlements and their staffs are appointed and paid by the Dharamsala government as formerly the district magistrates in Tibet were appointed by Lhasa. Under them are elected representatives of family groups and, on a higher level, representatives of different provincial language groups representing the people of the communities in the same way as the headmen and elders did in Tibet. Thus on the community level the central government and the people's representatives cooperate in the management of local affairs. All this is voluntary, as is the payment of taxes and the acceptance of the independent judicial authority. This total adaptation of the Tibetan system to modern needs did not require fundamental or revolutionary changes. The comparatively speedy and facile recovery of the Tibetan polity in exile bodes well for its future.

What about the homeland? Recent events have clearly demonstrated that the large majority of the six million Tibetans at home has not abandoned its faith or its loyalty to the Dalai Lama, who has come to personify more than ever the Tibetan religio-political order and national identity. All the more crucial then are the recent unofficial contacts between Dharamsala and Beijing about the possibility of a visit by the Dalai Lama to his homeland, obviously fraught with great danger. A person of true compassion and wisdom, the Dalai Lama faces perhaps the most critical decision of his present leadership role. Whatever the future, the success of the diaspora in building an alternate Tibet in India can no longer be undone. A Chinese scholar at the turn of the century pointed to two peoples who at the time had no national identity let alone independence, but who, in the scholar's prediction, would gain their future independence as a nation because they had maintained their culture and their faith. These two peoples were the Indians, then under British rule, and the Jews, long before the creation of the state of Israel. He would have said the same about the Tibetans today.

We cannot predict the future. Much will depend on what happens in China, where some of the basic concepts of communist belief and policy are today in doubt, and where the contradictions between economic necessities and doctrine may well become untenable. If some major changes in Beijing provide the opportunity for regaining freedom, the Tibetans are ready, having retained their cultural identity in India and, by extension, in their Tibetan homeland.

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