

The politics of a refugee problem: a study of Tibetan refugee settlements in Mysore District, India

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This paper explores the dynamics of Tibetan refugee settlements in South India and examines the process of existence of the refugees in the Indian social, cultural and political context. Daily life in the settlements is seen in relation to the broader Tibetan issue.

The study was conducted in four settlements in Mysore district, Karnataka state: Lugsung Samdupling, Tibetan Dickey Larsoe (TDL), Rabgayling and Dhondenling. These settlements were the first to be established in India in the aftermath of the displacement of Tibetans after 1959.

Although not the political center of the Tibetan refugees, the area around Mysore hosts around 45 000 refugees and several of the most important religious institutions in exile. Up until this study very little research has been done about these settlements, partly due to the restrictive position of the Indian authorities. No systematic comparison between settlements has been available so far.

The study draws on local and regional (and central) sources of primary and secondary data. Apart from fieldwork carried out in the settlements, primary data includes interviews with (local and central) key informants, top functionaries of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), as well as Indian state and central government functionaries.

Secondary data includes documents from the office of the Tibetan Chief Representative in Bangalore, which is responsible for the overall administration of the settlements and scattered communities in Karnataka. Other documents were obtained from the Settlement offices, and the Office of the Indian Administrator of the Tibetan refugee settlements of Mysore district under the Karnataka state government. Some rare photos of the settlements in the formative stages were also found in this office. Documents were collected from the regional offices of the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), Tibetan Freedom Movement (TFM) and the editor of the Voice of Tibet as well as from many private collections of Tibetans. Other sources of secondary data were the Libraries of the University of Mysore, the UNHCR Chair on Refugee Law at the National Law School of India University, the British Council, USIS Chennai and the Mythic Society, Bangalore. Many of the Tibetan documents also originate from CTA publications.

When the settlements were established the economic sustenance structures were almost totally based on agriculture. Today agricultural production is no longer enough to support the community and there is an increasing need for secondary income generating

activities. There has been a perceptible increase in the number of young, educated Tibetans trained to enter the informal job and professional sector in India. Also, there has been a notable decline in the participation of the youth in the freedom struggle. Now often an activity emerging from the monastic institutions, the struggle shows a tendency to become ritualistic, formal and symbolic, while ordinary people are primarily concerned with the economic security of the family.

The relationship that has evolved between the Tibetans in the settlements and the surrounding Indian community can be aptly described as cordial. Although the Tibetans have not really integrated in the surrounding Indian society, the two communities have been getting on comparatively well. On the other hand, Tibetan invitations extended to local neighbors at the celebration of the Dalai Lama's birthday, the Tibetan new year (Losar), the occasional organizing of so called Blood Donation Camps by the TYC on local festivals like Rajyothsava (State Reorganization Day), and the singing of an occasional song in public are often symbolic and formal. Inter-marriages between Tibetans and local people are still extremely rare. While there is no apparent resistance towards Tibetans working in the informal sector or in business, large-scale involvement or participation in the local socio-economic structure is still absent. A contrary trend is the handful of Indian youth that has been employed in the carpet weaving and incense making enterprises at the settlements. In many cases they have learned to speak Tibetan language with their colleagues and employers.

The larger Tibetan issue and exile institutions have been transplanted in the settlements along with the attendant dynamics right up to the democratisation efforts of the Tibetan exile administration. But there is a discernible gap in the implementation of the intended policies due to various factors like, for instance, the treatment of the democratization as an instruction from Dharamsala (a "democracy from above") rather than as a vibrant political dynamic and an opportunity of broad-based political participation. The paper concludes that the process of existence in the settlements goes on in the past, as well as in the present and the future: The interplay of past pride, present perceptions and future hopes and aspirations is making a transition from a collective to a more pronounced individualistic approach apparent among the Tibetans living in the settlements.