

## **INTERPRETING THE TIBETAN DIASPORA: CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND THE PRAGMATICS OF IDENTITY**

Sudeep Basu

Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion, National Law School of India

### ***Abstract***<sup>1</sup>

*Nearly all accounts of Tibetans in exile acknowledge the remarkable extent to which they have been able to maintain their culture against all odds. They were premised on the idea that exile and identity was only worth studying insofar as it contained traces of "how things were in the past", and proof of how well that past has been preserved. The result of this approach to refugee studies has been the tendency to neglect the variety of strategies displayed by Tibetans with regard to "place-making". Without making any definitive claims about the prevalence of a distinctly "Darjeeling Tibetan exile culture", this ethnographic study of Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town, India shows how the experience of movement to and from a "place" – Darjeeling town reconstitutes the idea that Tibetan refugees have of their relation to a specific "place" in the diaspora; of how this sense of "place" in the diaspora gives meaning and purpose to refugee lives.*

### **1. Introduction**

Since 1959, one of the primary concerns of the exiled Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugee community has specifically been to preserve the "rich cultural heritage of Tibet."<sup>2</sup> This attention to

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2 Soon after his arrival in exile the Dalai Lama founded a number of institutions at several levels for the preservation of Tibetan culture. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts was the first one established in 1959; the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies in 1969; the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives at

the preservation of linguistic, religious and artistic knowledge through both documentation and education<sup>3</sup> was prompted by two legitimate threats: the disappearance of Tibetan culture in the homeland under Chinese rule<sup>4</sup> and the disappearance of exiled Tibetans into their host societies.

Melvyn Goldstein on writing about the development of ethnic boundaries operative within and outside of the Tibetan community remarked that the "two critical aspects of the Government of India's (GOI) policy towards the Tibetan refugees have been 1) the liberal non-assimilative' framework as reflected in the separate settlements and 2) the broad 'delegated' authority of the Tibetan leadership headed by the Dalai Lama over the Tibetan settlements in India."<sup>5</sup> The proposed settlements were a kind of compromise because their envisioned size of three to four thousand was large enough to sustain Tibetan language and other institutions easily. The GOI further facilitated this cultural preservation effort by allowing Tibetans considerable autonomy and in particular by permitting the Dharamsala administration to exercise administrative control over the settlements.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars working on the Tibetan issue in the 70s and 80s unequivocally agreed that Tibetans had been extremely successful in retaining their ancestral way of life in the face of acculturation and constituted a model of good integration with

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Dharamsala since 1971; the Norbulingka Institute and the Tibet House in Delhi in 1965 represents Tibetan culture in the Diaspora.

3 For more on this see Margaret Nowak, *Tibetan Refugees: Youth and the New Generation of Meaning* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984): 52-103.

4 For an insight into Tibetan government-in-exile's perspective on contemporary Tibet see Central Tibetan Administration, *Tibet under Communist China* (Dharamsala: Central Tibetan Administration, Department of Information and International Relations, 2001). For a discussion of karaoke and modernity see Vincanne Adams, "Karaoke as Modern Lhasa, Tibet: Western Encounters with Cultural Politics," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, 4 (1996): 510-546.

5 Melvyn Goldstein, "Ethnogenesis and Resource Competition among Tibetan Refugees in South India: A New Face to the Indo-Tibetan Interface," in *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*, ed. (J.F. Fisher. Paris: Mouton, 1978): 398.

6 This did not mean that the GOI abdicated its authority over the Tibetans. Rather it means that the GOI (and the state government) had no objection to giving the Dharamsala administration de facto internal administrative control of the camps and to working with the individual refugees, so long as the latter did not object.

their host populations.<sup>7</sup> These early anthropological studies emphasized notions of adaptation, acculturation and change as the key processes through which a history of Tibetans in exile might be charted. It is not surprising that the anthropologists' primary research agenda became to assess the Tibetans' rate of adaptation to their new surroundings and their degree of acculturation. The result of this approach to refugee studies has been the tendency to portray exile life<sup>8</sup> of "self-settled" refugees or urban refugees of Darjeeling town in India as an atrophied vestige of the traditional Tibetan society. Scholars and visitors unofficially deride it as "inauthentic" and little worthy of investigation. The presentations of exile Tibetan culture which is exclusively focused on Dharamsala (the headquarters of the Tibetan government in exile in northern India) has the tendency to reify the "story" of exile primarily constructed by Tibetan administrators, intellectuals, lamas and "cultural performers" who are conversant with, and eager to engage in, debates about "the construction of Tibetan culture" on terms set by Western audiences. The rationale for engaging in the field-based study of Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling has been to critique, along Toni Huber's lines<sup>9</sup>, this primarily Dharamsala-centred construction of Tibetan exile culture. This study endeavours to know how

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7 See for instance Girija Saklani, *The Uprooted Tibetans in India: A Sociological Study of Continuity and Change* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1984); T.C. Palakshappa, *Tibetans in India: A Case Study of Mundgod Tibetans* (New Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1978).; T.B. Subba, *Flight and Adaptation: Tibetan Refugees in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1990).

8 The terms 'exile' (rgyang bud btang) and 'refugee' (btsan byol ba) will be used interchangeably for a number of reasons. Firstly, it comes out through the numerous conversations with Tibetans that the Tibetans commonly refer to themselves as both, although during political gatherings such as demonstrations the term 'refugee' is more often employed. Secondly, the use of both 'refugee' and 'exile' is legitimate since the entire population of Tibetan refugees in India does not in fact benefit from 'refugee' status since India is not a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention. First generation Tibetan refugees and their India-born children have been granted 'refugee-like status' and given a Refugee Certificate (RC) as proof of identity. However more recently arrived Tibetans are allowed into India but not given legal residence there.

9 Toni Huber delivers the brunt of this critique, "In my own experience, most Tibetan refugees are not like these persons and certainly do not live in Dharamsala but in rather non-cosmopolitan agricultural and craft communities. They tend to be humble and self-effacing, conservative, often uncritically devoted to their leaders, seemingly as avid about watching Hindi films as attending religious ceremonies and they have Hindi or Nepali not English, as their second language. Why are these many Tibetan exiles left backstage or merely out in the audience in the study of 'Tibetan culture?'" see Toni Huber, "Book Review," in *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. F.J. Korom (Journal of Buddhist Studies 1999), <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/5/huber981.htm>.

Tibetans as refugees experience place (Darjeeling) and how it becomes “inextricably bound up” with their identity.

Ruling elites and few lay Tibetans of pre-exilic Tibet who came from Tibet before 1959 secured a comfortable niche in the socio-economic environment of the Darjeeling region. Some of them had come along with their cattle and others with enough riches, gold and precious stones, to be soon counted among the richest in the region. These pre-exilic Tibetan hosts - Bhutias in Darjeeling town - extended financial and other forms of assistance to those less fortunate Tibetan refugees coming after 1959. The cultural affinity between the Bhutias and the Tibetan refugees would have had a role in creating a temporary home for Tibetans in exile. The proposition put forward by Tanka Subba (1990) that proper adaptation of groups is a function of cultural affinity would be critically examined. This ethnography of the displaced seeks to explore how the “refugee – host” dynamic in a “place” and the individual accounts of Tibetan/refugee identity that emerge from there reinforces those articulations that angle away from the stereotyped ways that Tibetans are read and suggest alternative currents that produce plural or hyphenated identities.

The section on methodology below would state the need to choose between appropriate methods depending on the contingencies in the field. The decades of living in exile has created divisive impressions between Tibetans and between Tibetans and their hosts that threaten the very understanding of all Tibetans as co-ethnics on which the rhetoric of cultural preservation and ultimately the struggle for independence depends. What would follow in the next section is an introduction to the fieldwork site – Darjeeling town and an elaboration of the early period in exile of Tibetans living there. The ethnographic focus would be on the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for Tibetan refugees which would draw attention to the local differences in the construction of categorical identities, refugeeness; Tibetanness and its ties with specific settings in the town where Tibetans reside and work alongside their hosts. This would open up a debate on what constitutes Tibetanness, refugeeness, and the nature of diasporic identity and its association with place.

### *Methodology*

The material that is presented here is derived from fieldwork which was conducted among Tibetan refugees and members of the host community (Bhutias and Nepalis) in Darjeeling town<sup>10</sup>. The field-based study was spread over a period of two years (2004-2006), totaling six months: October and November 2004 in Darjeeling and Sikkim; May 2005 in Darjeeling; April 2006 in Dharamsala; October-November 2006 in Darjeeling. The sampling of informants in the present study of refugees is a combination of "convenience" and "snowball sampling" methods. Deploying the convenience sampling method to the study of Darjeeling town refugees is however difficult since a majority are "self-settled" among host populations. Yet "convenience sample" is one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility. Given that refugees in Darjeeling town are self-settled, membership in any groupings is fluid with people being highly mobile (out-migration during the winter season). As a result, even refugees with legal status are effectively untraceable or absent. Physically locating the "type" of people one is interested in researching does require considerably more effort in heterogeneous urban settings. In this context, it was prudent to use a convenience sample when chance presented itself to get interview data and it represented too good an opportunity to miss. The gradual creation of relationships with key informants and their informants and so on happened through processes that culminated in "snowball samples".

In the present research study the principal role that has been followed is that of "Observer-as-participant". Opportunities for genuine participation were few in refugee contexts and that there were situations that were not amenable to the immersion that is a key ingredient of the ethnographic method. Initiating the interview process required establishing "rapport" with the

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10 Darjeeling town is situated in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India on a long, narrow mountain ridge of the Sikkim Himalayas that descends abruptly to the bed of the Great Rangit River. The town lies at an elevation of about 7,000 feet (2,100 m). The Darjeeling Municipal Area has an area of 10.57 sq km according to Census of India 2001. The total population of Darjeeling Municipality is 107,197 comprising of 55,963 males and 51,234 females according to Census of India 2001.

respondents so that they are prepared to participate in and persist with the interview. In the context of this research study on refugees this rapport could not be established quickly because of the difficulty of establishing “trust” involved in the relationship and the gulf that already exists between the refugee “lifeworlds” and that of the researcher. About eighty respondents coming from diverse backgrounds were interviewed on an individual basis in Darjeeling town and in the Tibetan Refugee Self help Centre (TRSHC)<sup>11</sup>. Over and above the eighty respondents who were part of the individual-based interviews, about forty respondents were involved in the group-based discussions. The age group of the Tibetan refugee respondents was between 18 to 50 years. They comprised those Tibetans who were born in exile on and after 1959.

## **2. Articulating Exilic Tibet: The Context of Darjeeling Town Refugees**

In describing the life of Tibetans in exile, using the phrase “myth of return”, it would be important to exercise caution in ascribing one single or even one dominant orientation to enforced existence outside Tibet, given the size and spread of the Tibetan Diaspora in India and elsewhere. On June 12, 1998 the exile Tibetan population had reached 122,078 from the initial estimated population of 80,000 in 1959.<sup>12</sup> The distribution of the total number of households and population by sex in India is given in Table 1.

While home for the Tibetans lies without a doubt over the Himalayas, Darjeeling in the East has emerged as the community’s home in exile among other settlements throughout South Asia, Europe, Australia, the United States and Canada. The “place” Darjeeling is however not strictly speaking a home to the generation of Tibetans who escaped into exile. Protracted exile

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11 Situated at ‘Hill-side’ Lebung West in the area locally known as ‘Hermitage’, the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre in Darjeeling town is one of the oldest refugee centres in the Tibetan Diaspora. This refugee settlement came into existence on October 2nd 1959.

12 Planning Council, Central Tibetan Administration, *Tibetan Demographic Survey 1998, Vol 1-2* (Dharamsala: Planning Council, Central Tibetan Administration, 2000), 7.

**Table 1. Number of households and population by sex**

Country	State/Region	No. of households	Population		
			Total	Males	Females
India	Total	15078	85147	48005	37142
	Central	1730	9722	5345	4377
	East	3711	18058	9340	8718
	North	5616	28520	15218	13302
	South	3741	27612	17462	10150
	West	280	1235	640	595

*Source: Tibetan Demographic Survey 1998, Planning Council, Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamsala, p. 60.*

however has produced a new generation of India-born Tibetan refugees who oscillate between the need to keep the notion of the homeland alive on the one hand and of the different kinds of material investments and emotional or social ties with host populations as a creative result of being the heirs of the displaced. The distribution of the Tibetan populace in West Bengal located in Eastern India is given below:

**Table 2. Distribution of Tibetans in West Bengal – India**

Region - West Bengal	Total population	Absentees as on 12 June, 1998
Calcutta	43	7
Darjeeling	2411	44
Ghoom, Darjeeling	442	4
Jalpaiguri, Jaigaon	45	0
Kalimpong	2023	118
Kurseong	447	1
Siliguri	22	0
Sonada, Tashiling	641	8
Total	17297	761

*Source: Tibetan Demographic Survey 1998, Planning Council, Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamsala, p. 36.*

Darjeeling has had a history of serving as a zone of contact between different ethnic communities over time. With the exception of the autochthonous Lepchas of the region, the Nepalese and the Tibetans moved to Darjeeling from Nepal and Tibet respectively. Darjeeling and Kalimpong town for instance

served as a trading centre but its economic basis expanded to cover activities in handicraft, transport and service sectors. Right until the late 1950's, caravans of Tibetan mules used to ply back and forth between Kalimpong and Tibetan towns through the place known as Chumbi Valley, connecting India and Tibet. Members of the oldest generation in exile came to India from areas that were proximate to Darjeeling through Eastern Nepal, Bhutan and India's North East Frontier Area after escaping from Tibet in 1959 on foot over the Himalayas. But refugees from far-flung areas of Tibet such as Amdo and parts of Kham were not so fortunate. They experienced more trauma and fatigue. Most of them had to trudge for more than a month while twenty days were often an average span of their trauma-filled flight.<sup>13</sup>

The early period was unanimously remembered as one of extreme social and economic hardship. The refugees who chose to stay in the Refugee Centre and other settlements were those who were not in a capacity to establish themselves privately mainly due to the lack of capital. Others resorted to alms collecting.<sup>14</sup> The following excerpt of an interview with a Tibetan youth, who is studying in Loyola College in Chennai, summarizes aspects of refugee life brought up by many informants in their chronicles of early hardship faced by their preceding generation who first arrived from Tibet: "My father and grandfather are there to give advice. They told me how they suffered, when they came here, they had no financial assistance<sup>15</sup>. Gradually my grandfather did small business. He always tells me to do your education well only then you would not suffer like them. Without education (*shes yon slob sbyong*) you cannot do anything, he says. The duty of our elders was to motivate us. From what they

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13 According to the Secretary of TRSHC (interviewed on 30/9/06 at TRSHC), most of the people at the Centre have come from U-Tsang province in Tibet (about 70%). About 20% from Kham and 10% from Amdo province.

14 It is difficult to assess what percentage of those refugees resorted to alms collecting. Even those who were once engaged in it are unable to give any tentative figure. It is generally agreed that they constituted a large number and were conspicuous in the town area.

15 The term 'financial assistance' used by the respondent is a pointer to the acute awareness that refugees have of the presence or absence of aid organizations in their lives or the support that is extended to them by individual donors.

told us, it seems that our identity as refugee was very marked then. Now we can pay to go to school (*slob grwa*)."<sup>16</sup>

## 2.1 There are no Refugees in this Area!

The major feature of the socio-cultural landscape that aided the Tibetan town refugees in their quest for safety and scope for progress in their socio-economic trajectory was the presence of Bhutias<sup>17</sup> who happened to be the well-established ethnic Tibetan immigrants of Indian nationality who lived in the Darjeeling region since the colonial times and even earlier. This fortuitous situation was put to use by Tibetan refugees seeking to conceal their "refugee" status. Their frequent usage of the Bhutia identity is revealed at the time of initiating a conversation with them. A respondent who had a shop in Mahakal market, (the most trendy and fashionable market selling garments and other accessories) on Ladenla road was most unwilling to talk anything about himself, despite the presence of my key informant (a Bhutia) who knew him well. He vigorously claimed to be a Bhutia, in other words, an immigrant from the pre-exilic era, an Indian and to know nothing about any refugees.<sup>18</sup> He said that he had lived in Japan for four years but then came back to Darjeeling to take up business. He insisted that there is similarity between Bhutias and Tibetans in terms of religion and place. "We are Buddhists, we are one," he said. On being asked why he decided to remain in Darjeeling, he explained his situation in the following words: "I

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16 Interview with Tibetan youth aged 19 years at TRSHC on It is important to note that for the new generation India-born Tibetans, their identity as refugee was something which had to be cognitively learnt. Tenzin Tsundue in his essay, "My Kind of Exile" emphasizes this point, "When we were children in a Tibetan school in Himachal Pradesh. Our teachers used to regale us with tales of Tibetans suffering in Tibet. We were often told that we were refugees and that we all bore a big 'R' on our foreheads", available at [www.friendsoftibet.org](http://www.friendsoftibet.org) on 15/06/07.

17 A general term applied to a number of groups bearing varied degree of affiliation with Tibetan culture. The early history of the Bhutias in Sikkim is shrouded in myth and legend but a common belief is that they came from eastern Tibet see L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers Darjeeling* (Government of West Bengal: Basumati Corporation Limited, 2001 [1907]: 188.

18 Laying claim to Bhutia identity is a common strategy adopted by most Tibetan refugees doing lucrative business in Darjeeling town area. It serves a strategic end of securing ties to Indian citizenship and providing business opportunities in a condition of anonymity and security.

know this place better than any other place.<sup>19</sup> I do not want to go and stay in any other part of India. It is convenient to do business in India but given the chance I would like to go to America (*a mi ri ka*) you know, there is opportunity (*go skabs*) there."<sup>20</sup>

On furthering probing which became possible after some degree of trust was established, what came to light was the fact that the respondent was socialized into becoming aware of the connection between his identity as a Tibetan refugee and the place – Darjeeling (he had many Bhutia friends, like my key informant). His knowledge that the Bhutias are Tibetans and diasporics of an earlier era like the Tibetan refugees themselves initiated the process of “emplacement”, by creating a sense of belonging to the place (Darjeeling) which in the imaginative sense formed part of what he, echoing my key informant called, “the Great land of Tibet”.<sup>21</sup> This similarity of sentiment generally held by Tibetan refugees and Bhutias echoes the British colonial perception that the Bhutias and Lepchas were unlikely to shift their loyalty from Tibet as they were strongly integrated by a common heritage, religion, language and culture. They all belonged to the Tibeto-Burman group and adhered to a pan-Buddhist religion of “Lamaist Buddhism” from where they derived their ethnic identity. The British policy of encouraging Nepali migrants to Darjeeling throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the subsequent period originated from the colonial design to outbalance the original ethnic domination of the Lepchas and

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19 For the respondent, ‘*knowing this place*’ meant a certain degree of identification with the place – Darjeeling, its history and geography.

20 Excerpt from an interview with a Tibetan shop owner at Mahakal market, Darjeeling town, on 19/05/05. The source of the respondent’s knowledge of the three places - Darjeeling, India and America that he mentions is both experiential and imaginative. Here we see the process of diasporic identifications at play. While feeling of belonging to Darjeeling is greatest, the place is evaluated in relation or opposition to India. America is there in the distant horizon, for him an abode of prosperity, a projection into the future. Tibet as a place is not mentioned by him in the initial phase of the interview.

21 My key informant, a Bhutia, in the numerous conversations with him, once interjected and told about the historical fact that the King of Sikkim used to traditionally give tributes periodically to the Dalai Lama of Tibet at Lhasa, as demonstration of his allegiance to the Lamaist State. He told that he had read it somewhere but could not recollect the source.

Bhutias in the region.<sup>22</sup> The British found in the Nepali immigrants, a group of loyal subjects whose allegiance would lie with the British and not with the Dalai Lama of Tibet.<sup>23</sup>

The town refugees' assessments of their actual relations with Bhutia immigrants and vice-versa vary considerably. Some informants say that Tibetan refugees and Bhutias have got on very well together and a good deal of cooperation exists between them. My respondent (a Bhutia) spoke about his childhood friend (a Tibetan refugee who lived in TRSHC). "He did not hesitate to mix with others in the town. He was like this from young years. We played football at the local club – Viva sporting club and in Darjeeling Government College and Himalayan sporting club. It is his sporting spirit that has helped. He is like a non-playing captain. Now he works like a liaison man. He even knows some police personnel in town. Any trouble in TRSHC everybody goes to him for help. In the Centre the people are orthodox type. They think that young generation if they mix with local guys, they will get adulterated. My friend (*grogs po*) is different. But I see that the Centre's members can choose to have less and remain within their limits. A very good quality, very few Tibetans are like that. My friend did not choose to go abroad." My Bhutia respondent hastened to add that there is mutual support between Tibetan refugees and the Bhutias. His remarks testified to this, "Last year wool that was being imported to Darjeeling was seized at Dalkhola by commercial tax check post. I called up commercial tax office and got them (Tibetan refugees) out of the problem. They need us for the day to day problems and interactions with local authorities. We need them also. In my marriage (*chang sa*), I was not getting a groom hat. The self help centre has a cultural section. They lend hats to other Buddhists. I got the groom hat

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22 Atis Dasgupta, "Ethnic Problems and the Movement for Autonomy in Darjeeling," *Social Scientist* 27, 11/12 (1999): 47-68.

23 In order to understand the ethnic domain in the context of Darjeeling spelt out here, it is particularly relevant to recall Michael Fischer's essay, "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory," in which he states, "The different ethnicities constitute a 'family of resemblance': similar, not identical; each enriching because of its inter-references, not reducible to mechanical functions of solidarity, mutual aid, political mobilization or socialization. It is the inter-references, the interweaving of cultural threads from different arenas that give ethnicity its phoenix-like capacities for reinvigoration and re-inspiration" See Michael Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford & George Markus (California: University of California Press, 1986): 194-233.

from them. In schools too when some Buddhist functions are to be held, we approach the refugees for assistance. Anybody can come of help later that is why I help others."<sup>24</sup>

Other informants believe that the Bhutias had desired first and foremost to distance themselves from the Tibetan refugees when they first arrived, even when support was extended to them. Conversation with an elderly Bhutia, a former Councillor of the Bhutia Busty Ward, revealed this aspect. "Tibetan refugees who came with precious stones and gold did not go to the Centre. They settled in different parts of Darjeeling town, even in Bhutia Busty area. The refugees used to stink. They coughed all the time. We avoided contact with them. Refugees would not stay in queue for collecting water. Khampas were brute people. They carried the habits of Tibetan highlands with them to India. They did not take bath when they came here. Many had T.B. In schools the Tibetan refugee students used to vomit. In Bhutia Busty some Bhutia families gave them shelter. My family had given rented accommodation to a Tibetan refugee when he came here. We had even given him permission to enter our kitchen. He told me about stories of Chinese atrocities. He told of the times in Tibet when the Tibetans never trusted their own brothers who could be spies. They did not sleep all day long. Such a grave situation was not there when they came to live with the locals of Darjeeling."<sup>25</sup>

Many other residents interviewed at Bhutia Busty spoke of their unwillingness to associate too conspicuously with the Tibetan refugees. "We Bhutias do not take part in any political activity that is for the cause of Tibetan independence,"<sup>26</sup> said a few

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24 Excerpt from an interview with a Bhutia respondent who worked in a government office in his mid 40s at Bhutia Busty on 24/09/06.

25 Excerpt from the interview with the former councillor of Bhutia Busty on 29/09/06. Both conjunction and disjunction is seen to characterize Bhutia-refugee relationship. Tibet that is portrayed by the refugee in the excerpt is a picture of Tibet which assumes an unShangrila-like appearance, which violates western sensibilities of a pristine Tibet. Exile is therefore a 'place of refuge' where normal social relations are restored at the intimate level of the family.

26 Interview with few Bhutia respondents in Bhutia busty on 24/9/06. This is not to suggest that the Bhutias are indifferent to the Tibetan cause. On the contrary, Bhaichung Bhutia, the Indian football captain who has his home in Sikkim took the decision to drop out of the team that would carry the Olympic torch on its Indian leg in New Delhi. "I sympathise with the Tibetans and their cause. I have sent a letter to the IOA (Indian Olympic Association) refusing to carry the torch," Bhaichung told The Telegraph (The Telegraph, Calcutta,

respondents. The disjuncture that exists in the refugee-Bhutia relationship is further revealed in the subsequent discussion with the Bhutias about the Bhutia encounter with the refugees. One Bhutia respondent echoed the sentiment of the youth members of his community. "The Tibetan refugees used the term '*Ghyagar Khampas*' to denote Indian citizens. They see Bhutias at a lower stage than them. They do not express it openly. Their reason may be that our Tibetan language is not good. We do not have foundation about that. We are comfortable here since we are interacting with Indian Nepalis and India is where we belong. So we do not mind if the Tibetan refugees feel this way about us. But sometimes we have to talk in Nepali in order to put them down."<sup>27</sup> Nepali language here is deliberately used as an instrument of domination by the Bhutias to keep the Tibetan refugees at bay. The use of Nepali is a constant reminder not only of the minority status of the Tibetan refugees but also of the threat of assimilation. However, speaking fluent Nepali is the easiest method adopted by Tibetan refugees to fend off outsiders' suspicion. The other is by negating the refugee label in front of outsiders by passing<sup>28</sup> themselves off as Bhutias.

Using the "adoptive label" of a Bhutia therefore does not conceal the actual identity of a Tibetan as refugee in contexts where the traffic existed between Tibetan refugees and locals. The strategy of invisibility arose not out of a generalized fear of repression or expatriation. It particularly worked in allowing them to avoid involvement with strangers, particularly when it entailed revealing one's status. The play of identities in shifting contexts opened up avenues whereby they could become self-employed or join the competitive market, obtain licenses for trade and spend leisure time in town. The use of Bhutia identity by Tibetan refugees shaped by the nexus of relations in gaining success in business

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Tuesday 1st April 2008). Bhutia's decision points to how Sikkim and Darjeeling as 'places' continue to be implicated in the ongoing debate on Tibet's historical and geopolitical status.

27 Interview with a Bhutia respondent in Bhutia busty on 25/9/06.

28 In traditional usage, 'passing' refers to the practice of assuming the identity of another type, class or groups of persons in order to be recognized as a member of that group, for social, economic or political reasons see Emily Yeh, "Will the Real Tibetan Please Stand Up! Identity Politics in the Tibetan Diaspora," in *Tibet, Self and the Tibetan Diaspora: Voices of Difference*, ed. Christiaan Klieger (Boston: Brill Publications, 2002). 237.

and employment did not go unnoticed by Bhutias and Nepalis. One Bhutia respondent living near the Tibetan dominated Dragon and Mahakal market spoke about the Bhutia-Tibetan refugee relationship in the following words: "Human beings have the tendency to settle down in the place where they come to stay. This was true for the Nepalese in Darjeeling. Tibetans came as migrants before 1959. They came as refugee after 1959. Earlier Bhutia people were not literate, so they allowed refugees to take advantage of the name of 'Bhutia'. After sometime, when literacy among Bhutias grew, competition among Bhutias and other Scheduled Tribes<sup>29</sup> to get government jobs intensified. If an outsider comes, then it creates problems for us. Bhutia Welfare Association did raise protest against Tibetan refugees taking up government jobs under the Scheduled Tribes certificate."<sup>30</sup> The desire for anonymous status arose out of the need to circumvent excess bureaucratic entanglement. By virtue of not remaining spatially isolated as in a camp, refugees in Darjeeling town could translate this desire into a workable reality in the form of obtaining ration cards, entering their names in the voter's list and procuring Scheduled Tribes certificate by using the surname "Bhutia". The passage to obtaining Indian citizenship was thus clear but had to be arranged discreetly.<sup>31</sup>

The need to buy nationality was deemed more necessary for those refugees who had become wealthy on account of owning houses, restaurants, hotels, shops or valuable items like taxis and cars. Wealth made them visible in town areas which necessitated the procurement of citizenship documents to deal with "exposure". Identity documents on the one hand signaled permanent residence in Darjeeling town but it did not have a fixed one-to-one correspondence with particular degrees of commitment to place among the refugees-turned-Indian citizens. Citizenship documents were only a technique of invisibility or means for commerce. It was something more than a simple matter of have or have-not for Tibetans at TRSHC. In a situation

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29 The total population of Scheduled Tribes in the Darjeeling Municipality is 12,747, of which 6,448 is male and 6,299 is female (Census of India 2001).

30 The Bhutia respondent was an elderly man. His family members were helping him narrate. Excerpt from an interview with a Bhutia resident in Darjeeling town on 29/09/06.

31 Obtaining Indian citizenship has never been an easy decision for a Tibetan in exile.

of protracted exile, the citizenship question is a controversial one confronting Tibetans in the diaspora. Other problems or complications were raised in its wake and had its distinctive resonance in Darjeeling town in particular. These were the perspectives on the problem of "return"; to questions of identity as an effect of diasporic (multiple) attachments to several places at one time; in the framework of the Central Tibetan Administration's policy which officially discourages Tibetans from taking up Indian citizenship consistent with the cultural preservation thesis which it espouses. Successfully claiming to be a Bhutia, producing the ration cards at the food ration shops, voter's identity card at the time of Municipal elections provided sufficient proof of naturalization for many town refugees. Although it was possible for Tibetans to garner Indian citizenship through use of these identity signs, they could not hide their identity as refugees from locals. The effectiveness of these identity signs depended upon the general acceptance of and tacit support from sections of the local population.

The fact that immigrant agents and officers at the Foreigner's Registration Office (who were recruited from the local Bhutia and Nepali Buddhist community) were reluctant to disclose information about the size of Tibetan refugee population in Darjeeling town to an outsider is sufficient proof of the prevalence of a tacit approval from sections of the local community of the workings of this "naturalization" or de facto citizenship of town refugees. Yet nearly all Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town fulfilled the requirements of the Foreigners Registration Act by obtaining the Registration Certificate (RC)<sup>32</sup>. Several Tibetans reiterated that the procedure of renewing the Registration Certificate every year was problematic, cumbersome and indicative of their changeable and precarious status. Further, it is incumbent upon Tibetan refugees having the Registration Certificate to report his/her presence to the district registration officer within 7 days of his/her arrival, every time one moves out of the district of registration and residential address for more than 7 days. In practice, few Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling who

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32 Both Tibetan refugees and Tibetan-turned Indian citizens possessed the Registration Certificate (RC). RC was an emphatic proof of their Tibetan nationality; their adherence to the movement for the independence of Tibet and an affirmation of their ethnic identity as Tibetan.

are RC holders take the trouble to report. As residents of India they move around freely from place to place unlike foreign visitors to the country.

### **3. The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement**

The ethnographic exploration of the lived and experiential circumstances of the Tibetan refugees in a specific host context (Darjeeling town) on the one hand reinforces the idea that the Tibetan refugees and Tibetans (Bhutias) have always been mobile or 'on the move' under very different conditions and predicaments. This view immediately served to highlight the theoretical limitations of viewing refugee groups like those of the Tibetans as occupying a bounded territory; of viewing cultures as spatially localized. The corollary of this perspective is that people regardless of their territorial origin have become or are in the process of becoming deterritorialized, resulting in generalized "homelessness"<sup>33</sup> or "refugeeness". The implication of such a conception of displacement is that since there is no need for people to belong to a specific place, the idea of return "home" or repatriation as constituting a durable solution to protracted refugee problems is unfounded. On the other hand, the transnational practices of Tibetan refugee groups as a result of their dispersion have paved the way for the creation of a complex niche in the "hostlands". The existence of this complex niche that directs attention to the processes, practices, actors and relations in the specific local context of Darjeeling town is seen to provide meaning to the diasporic world that the Tibetan refugees inhabit.

The presence of pre-exilic Tibetan hosts, the Bhutias in Darjeeling town and recognition of the fact that the current situation of Tibetan refugees is a result of past (pre-1950) migrations and eventual settlement of Tibetans in the region directs attention away from viewing the Tibetans in terms of the presumed isomorphism of people, culture and territory. The ethnic similarities have been particularly important in the sense that a large part of the refugees, through tribal relations (claiming Scheduled Tribes status of the Bhutias) or by echoing pan-

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<sup>33</sup> See Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*. (New York: Times Books, 1979).

Buddhist sentiments expressed in statements such as "*We are Buddhists, we are one*", have been able to lay claim upon available resources. The movement of Tibetans as refugees into the region previously occupied by the ethnic Bhutias and their use of the adoptive label – Bhutia - for functional purposes spawned new local groups and new relationships both of cooperation and conflict with neighbouring groups. The Bhutias were for long caught up in the same contingent social situation as the refugees, except that they have all acquired Indian citizenship.

The growing competition between Scheduled Tribes created a rift between Bhutias and the refugees but there were also conscious attempts by refugees to reduce feelings of hostility among neighbours. This attitude is reflected in the following statement by the Welfare Officer of the Darjeeling refugee settlement who said, "We are neither a burden nor an asset to Darjeeling local economy. As refugees we have to work that is all." Living in urban residential areas among nationals meant that the Tibetan refugees have had to fend for themselves in an otherwise economically depleted and congested urban space. Neighbourhoods where Tibetans live with non-Tibetans therefore require and produce contexts.<sup>34</sup> They have to be carved out from "some sort of hostile or recalcitrant environment" which may include other neighbourhoods. Thus, the making and remaking of ethnic communities in a place became intertwined with acts of surviving and gaining resources. Yet the construction of Tibetan identities in the diaspora remain linked to the experiences of flight from the homeland and seeking asylum, which results in differentiation of the Tibetan community dispersed across spaces on the basis of their affiliations or identity groups back home. The dispersal of Tibetan refugee groups involves a strong sense of the danger of forgetting the location of origin (as is the fate of the Bhutias of Darjeeling, which the Tibetan refugees living there are well aware of). Even though the Tibetan refugees are in a "Stateless"<sup>35</sup> situation, the very prospect that they may never return home creates a more intensified yearning for the

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34 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997): 184.

35 G. Samuel, "Tibet as a Stateless Society and Some Islamic Parallels," *Journal of Asian Studies* 4, 2 (1982): 215-229.

homeland. Thus diasporic consciousness, as Clifford states, "lives loss and hope as a defining tension." A Tibetan refugee's ruminations about Tibet, "We have a dream of a free Tibet. In everyday life, the dream sometimes vanishes. But it is in there. It cannot be erased or something. It is in there. Anytime it can come up. Even if it does not come up, it is in there,"<sup>36</sup> shows how this yearning becomes a major preoccupation and, in a sense, replaces the real possibility of returning home.

When seen as not just movement but as a relational network associated with particular places, diaspora becomes a way of creating a rift between places of belonging and places of residence. The following statement made by a Tibetan refugee engaged in the garment business in Darjeeling town, "I know this place better than any other place<sup>37</sup>. I do not want to go and stay in any other part of India. It is convenient to do business in India but given the chance I would like to go to America (*a mi ri ka*) you know, there is opportunity (*go skabs*) there,"<sup>38</sup> points to how diasporic cultures mediate, as James Clifford argues, "the experiences of living here and remembering/desiring or not desiring another place".

#### **4. At Home in the Diaspora!**

Darjeeling has had a history of serving as a zone of contact between different ethnic communities over time. With the exception of the autochthonous Lepchas of the region, the Nepalese and the Tibetans moved to Darjeeling from Nepal and Tibet respectively.<sup>39</sup> Darjeeling and Kalimpong town for instance

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36 Excerpt from the interview with a Tibetan refugee at TRSHC on 24/05/05. See James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

37 For the respondent, '*knowing this place*' meant a certain degree of identification with the place – Darjeeling, its history and geography.

38 Excerpt from an interview with a Tibetan shop owner at Mahakal market, Darjeeling town, on 19/05/05. The source of the respondent's knowledge of the three places - Darjeeling, India and America that he mentions is both experiential and imaginative. Here we see the process of diasporic identifications at play. While feeling of belonging to Darjeeling is greatest, the place is evaluated in relation or opposition to India.

39 See Arthur Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling* (Alipore, Bengal: Bengal Government Press, 1947) and O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers Darjeeling*. Government of West Bengal: Basumati Corporation Limited, 2001 [1907].

served as a trading centre but its economic basis expanded to cover activities in handicraft, transport and service sectors. Right until the late 1950's caravans of Tibetan mules used to ply back and forth between Kalimpong and Tibetan towns. In this sense, Tibetans historically did not have a boundary nor were they fixed in a territory but had a "place" and were "on the move". Past migrations of Tibetans (before 1950) into the region had to be taken into cognizance. It was difficult to doubt the historicity of their move, even though it had happened long enough ago to be embellished in myth and legend. As member of the pioneering group of Tibetans became more and more "emplaced" in an area, they acquired a name – Bhutia that had no reference to their place of settlement (Darjeeling) but was identified with the place that they had left – "Bhot" or "Tibet". When the Tibetan refugees moved into Darjeeling town from 1959 onwards, they began to settle or work in areas where their predecessors (the Bhutias) had their presence (Bhutia Busty) or in places (Ladenla road) or shops bearing Tibetan names. The refugees were aware that the etymology of the word 'Darjeeling' had roots in Tibetan culture. They began to adopt the name "Bhutia" in their everyday life in order to conceal their refugee identity in certain contexts. This can be seen as a consequence of their need to gain shelter by presenting a veneer that they seek assimilation in a host society and their commitment to either a theoretically unending process of movement into new places or a deferred "return" to their homeland. Their attempts to forge meaningful ties with the Bhutias and the dominant Nepalis in the town became integral to the process of rehabilitation in the early years of exile. Notwithstanding, the apparent assimilative tendencies that the refugees exhibited in their use of the Bhutia label or in their speaking of Nepali, the gradual differentiation between Tibetan refugees and the Bhutias had set in based primarily on the political commitment of the former to the idea of "return" expressed in spatial and cultural terms. The Tibetan-host relationship characterized by conjunction and disjunction relative to local<sup>40</sup> circumstances makes it possible to appreciate the significance that the Tibetans attribute to their refugee identity

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40 Local or locality in the study is viewed, borrowing from Appadurai, in strictly relational and contextual sense. Refugee and host dynamic is captured in specific neighbourhoods, whether it is in the social form of the refugee centre or the market place in Darjeeling town.

and the “spatial practices” by means of which the Tibetans produce and maintain a sense of “place” in a contested environment.

While the sense of an eventual return to the place of origin seemed imminent to those who had escaped from Tibet in the initial years of exile, their heirs born in Darjeeling have instead begun to look forward to another place of arrival – the West or some other place of settlement in order to give meaning to their present localized existence. The “return” to Darjeeling by some refugees from the West or places in the diaspora during Losar (Tibetan New Year), provides additional information about the predicaments of exile life in a different host context. Becoming legally secure through obtaining a refugee status (Registration Certificate and the Identity Certificate) or acquiring citizenship rights while planning to move to other host societies is perceived by many refugees as the one kind of life they can lead in Darjeeling for the present. Some Tibetan refugees in India are aware of other family members and friends who have acquired citizenship rights in the West but have found meaningful integration into their host societies unattainable. For some Tibetans, Darjeeling appears to continually refer beyond itself to other places – United States, Canada, recently Australia. So while living in Darjeeling and India is an attractive option during certain periods of one’s life, for example, when acquiring school and college education or some skill, other places of residence, such as the United States, is regarded as the best place for work or reunifying the family and kin group. As these different places become increasingly familiar, whether through direct experience, word of mouth or other communication channels (phayul.com) that allows Tibetans to monitor current events, it becomes difficult to see them as separate places.

In spite of expressing an interest in obtaining Indian citizenship, a Tibetan respondent in Darjeeling town confirmed having more than one identity by stating that, “Becoming an Indian becomes important, we get opportunity. With Holiness there, we feel proud we are Tibetans. I do not mind becoming an Indian but I want to keep my status as refugee. It is important that we believe that we will get our freedom. We can always convert to Tibetan, when Tibet is free. I am a Tibetan but since I am born in India I am an

Indian.”<sup>41</sup> Integration into the host society, Darjeeling or India, here is imagined as becoming an Indian citizen while still maintaining Tibetan identity and culture. The networks across political borders created by Tibetans in their quest for economic advancement and political recognition have afforded the possibility of having hybrid identities. Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling are seen as either bilingual or multilingual (knowing Tibetan, Hindi, English and Nepali), frequently maintaining homes in two or more places and pursuing economic, political and cultural interests that require their real or imaginary presence in both. The emphasis on “place” by Tibetan youths living in TRSHC who have chosen to remain refugees or stateless does not signify alienation from the present or a straightforward and actual longing to return to Tibet. Some of the self-settled Tibetans in Darjeeling town have become Indian citizens, given the perceived benefits which accompany that status, such as freedom in terms of physical movement, exercise of the right to own businesses, property and increased educational opportunities. However, in the Darjeeling town context, acquiring citizenship documents was not tantamount to a declaration that a Tibetan has given up the belief that Tibet will eventually be free. Embracing Indian citizenship has had an instrumental dimension, in that, it exists alongside the desire and the practice of remaining a refugee while interacting with co-refugees or constitutive others within a refugee settlement context or becoming a diasporic in the context of the town.

The exponents of the “deterritorialization” theme have argued that one of the reasons why refugees are in a deplorable state is because of the assumption that there are “natural” places from which people derive their identity. However, the “right to remain” or belonging to a territory with strong associations through long-term occupation, does not make sense unless it means the right to stay in that territory in safety and that right is exercised by the right holders themselves free from external pressure.<sup>42</sup> The way Tibetans prior to 1959 and after have experienced movement into

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41 Excerpt from the interview with a Tibetan respondent who does garment business at Mahakal market, Darjeeling town on 24/05/05.

42 G. Kibreab, “Revisiting the Debate on People, Place, Identity and Displacement,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, 4 (1999): 384-410.

and settlement in a new place, Darjeeling, is determined by whether and how much they viewed themselves as being displaced against their will and whether their notions of territorial attachments can be retained and even extended to areas not necessarily adjacent to each other. The Tibetans who moved to Darjeeling as refugees clearly viewed themselves as "being displaced against their will". The telling and retelling of stories told by older generation exiles to the new generation Darjeeling-born Tibetans about Tibet and the early years of struggle in a new place; the re-creation of familiar features from the lost environment as recaptured in the architectural design of houses built in and around the refugee settlement; rituals of naming houses and streets with their spatial and temporal symbolism; inner decoration of refugee homes and the transportation of familiar objects and personal mementoes constitute the set of "place-making" activities meant to re-establish continuity with the place of origin. For the refugees there was no obvious rupture of continuity with the place (Tibet) from which they moved. What was also at work in these forms of social action was the process of "reterritorialization" as Tibetan refugee groups faced with a protracted exile condition have attempted to delimit and influence relationships with "others" over a geographic area (Darjeeling town). This process assumes significance in places like Darjeeling where the rights of, access to and use of sources of livelihood are apportioned on the basis of territorially anchored identity. To be outside that physical context often entails loss of rights to belong to an ethnic or national group which is physically grounded. In a multi-ethnic place like Darjeeling which has been host to migrant groups in the past, Tibetan refugee groups and individuals have developed over time a repertoire of strategies of managing assimilative tendencies towards productive ends on the one hand and forging meaningful social relations that link several localities in more than one "host" place.

When the Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town related with strangers or other ethnic groups, they tended to use the term, "Bhutia"- an Indian ethnic group, which in consequence implied their identification with an Indian identity. Assuming an Indian identity, such as, Bhutia, did not mean that they had lost their Tibetan identity. While referring to themselves as Bhutia, the Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town could collectively view

themselves as part of on-going movements from the place of origin (Tibet), of long-term displacement, dispersal and resettlement in new societies of residence. Nearly all Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town under the Foreigners Registration Act have also obtained the Registration Certificate (RC) as an emphatic proof of their Tibetanness. The RC remains of the most powerful unifying symbols for the Tibetan exiles. In such a situation, it becomes difficult to distinguish between a façade and a reality, since refugees are unwilling to disclose how they identify themselves. Identifying themselves or identified by others as Indian citizens has the intended or unintended consequence of giving off the image that refugees “imagine” themselves as being part of the host society or producing real or fictitious forms of cosmopolitan identity.

Even in more deterritorialized times and settings where the very notion of “home” as a durably fixed place is in doubt, displaced peoples like the Tibetans who have clustered around the imagination of homelands or places from a distance are seen to be the ones who have become “emplaced”, that is, developed attachment to a “place” or “places” and have tried to establish firm territorialized anchors in their new place of residence. Territoriality is thus reinscribed at just the point it threatens to be erased. As actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become even more salient. Deterritorialization has not thereby created subjects who are “free-floating monads”, despite what is sometimes implied by those eager to celebrate freedom and playfulness of the postmodern condition. Cosmopolitan identity cannot be wished into existence in most host societies where identities are determined on the basis of territorially anchored identities.

Since the Tibetans who moved to a territorialized place like Darjeeling as refugees could not claim entitlement based on past physical occupation or membership of a co-ethnic group such as the Bhutias, the desire to return to one’s place of origin became an overriding preoccupation, bordering obsession. The heirs to the displaced Tibetans have however tended to identify strongly with their society of residence by virtue of being born in Darjeeling town – as one Tibetan respondent stated, “Darjeeling

is there till we are here. It is not our country. It is our birthplace. Till we are here in India, it is our home," and the opportunity this offers regarding rights of access to resources and protection that is due to citizens of a territory. They have also been the ones who have maintained multiple connections with co-ethnics living in other host societies in ways that aim at supporting a distant homeland, Tibet, and enabling opportunities by virtue of being spatially anchored. Identities of Tibetans that operate in the context of the town are shown as being fictional, adoptive, hidden or lost. They do not suggest an oversimplified opposition between territorialized and deterritorialized identities or statements such as "that people are not free to go wherever they want". Rather identity is seen as a "situated" process. It is striking how Tibetans respond once the option of moving within the diaspora presents itself, regardless of whether the option is ever exercised. It is the movement of individuals and groups from place to place within the diaspora as being in the realm of the possible and not that of becoming rooted in a particular place which becomes important for Tibetans in certain interpretive contexts.

Through the course of the study of Tibetan refugees, it became evident that the attempt has not been to arrive at a holistic description of a "total way of life" of Tibetan exiles nor has it been to provide a "durable solution" to protracted exile of Tibetans. This ethnography of displacement seeks to bring to bear the specific histories of groups operating in a region and their traditions of movement; their practices of "dwelling in a place and their dwelling-in-displacement" (Clifford 1997) in order to understand how identities become allied to places.

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