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**Cultural Survival**  
The Tibetans in Nepal

by Carol Rose

Tenzin Samphel rises at dawn to pour water into the 14 silver bowls arranged on his family's altar. Lighting a small candle, the Tibetan teenager prostrates himself seven times before a portrait that hangs above the home-made shrine. It is a framed photograph of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual and political leader, gazing benevolently down upon his young devotee.



Buddhist statue at Swayambhunath shrine, site of the primordial Buddha. One of many sites in Kathmandu sacred to Tibetan and Nepalese alike.

Tenzin is one of some 100,000 Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India who look to the Dalai Lama for guidance as they await return to their homeland. Tenzin's parents, like most of the refugees, followed the Dalai Lama's 1959 flight into exile to escape Chinese occupation forces in Tibet.

Tenzin has lived all 19 years of his life in a refugee camp in Kathmandu. Tibet is land he knows only in stories and prayers. Yet, he speaks of it as home. "We have many rivers and there are no roads at all, so people walk far distances and carry all their goods on yaks and donkeys," he says. "They eat tsampa [barely flour], meat and cheese. And it is too cold to wash with water."

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#### TIBETAN REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS: NEPAL AND INDIA

ornately-decorated Buddhist monasteries and a choice between Western and Tibetan medical clinics. Birth rates and infant mortality rates for Tibetans in the Kathmandu valley are lower than for the Nepalese population at large.<sup>1</sup>

In a single generation, the Tibetan refugees largely have overcome the economic destitution of forced migration to emerge as an economic success story. Yet, as a new generation grows up in exile, the Tibetans face a far more difficult challenge: saving their culture.

<sup>1</sup> Birth rate: 14.3 per 1,000 in Tibetan refugee settlements; 27.8 per 1,000 in surrounding Tibetan communities; 41 per 1,000 among Nepalese. Crude death rate of 5.1 per 1,000 within Jawalakhel refugee settlement, well below Nepalese death rate of 18 per 1,000 in 1985. Pauline Heslop, Assessment of the Tibetan Primary Health Care/T.B. Control Projects in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Unpublished report. April-May 1989.

"I want to go to and see what the Chinese have done - I hear they have damaged our monasteries," he continues. "I will go back to work for the Tibetan government and teach the poor people in Tibet, because they are not that much educated.

"We will get freedom," he adds, "Because the Dalai Lama says we will get it."

Tenzin's sanguine view of the future is shared by many of the 14,000 Tibetans living in Nepal. They express profound faith in the Dalai Lama, whom they believe is the 14th reincarnation of the Buddhist deity of compassion who rules Tibet. Moreover, Tibetans in Nepal have built an economic base. They dominate the carpet-weaving industry, which is second only to tourism as the leading source of foreign exchange for Nepal. They run their own schools, have

## FLIGHT

China annexed Tibet in 1950, turning the mountainous "Land of Snows" into one of nine "autonomous regions" of China. Since then, more than one million people have died "as a direct result of the political instability, executions, imprisonment, and wide scale famine engendered by the policies of the People's Republic of China in Tibet," states a 1989 U.S. Congressional finding. In addition, more than 6,000 monasteries, containing 1,300 years of Tibetan art and literature, were destroyed or stolen by the Chinese during the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the report stated.<sup>2</sup>

Those who fled Tibet during those years endured tremendous hardships walking across the Himalayan mountain range under constant threat of death from Chinese soldiers. Most arrived in Nepal virtually destitute. Unaccustomed to the tropical climates of Nepal and India, many died of malaria, dysentery and infectious diseases. Those who survived the long journey recall the flight and early years in exile:

\* "The Chinese took our yaks," says Pema Wangchuk, age 55. "They came into our tents with guns, and if we didn't bow to them they said they would shoot us. My parents were shot when they were running away."

\* "In Tibet I made and sold blankets, kept sheep and wore thick aprons," says Lobsang Jampe, age 55. "We escaped, but then my mother and father died at the border. When we Tibetans die we cut the people into pieces and give the bones to the eagles. So we did that."

\* "My uncle was jailed for 20 years, and my brother was jailed for 20 years," said Rinzin, age 62. "They



Tenzin Samphel at his parents' prayer altar, surrounded by Tibetan miniature "Thangka" paintings.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, S. Res. 82, Washington, DC., March 15, 1989 and the US Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989, Washington, D.C. December 22, 1987.

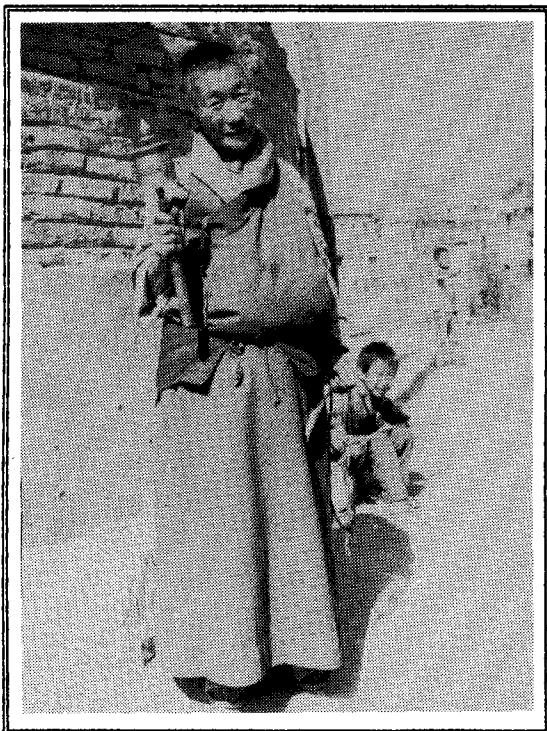
killed my father in jail, and my other brother jumped from rocks and killed himself rather than be caught. He was a monk."

\* "I was 28 years old with two young children," says Bhumchung, age 62. "I heard the Chinese were taking children away to China. So I put the children on my back and ran away. I tried to walk behind other people in case they dropped some food."

\* "We went to India first, but everyone became terribly sick from the hot climate and diarrhea," says Ugen Tsering, age 42. "I worked as a child doing road work, and I remember so many flies and so much hot. I almost died from the diarrhea. A lot of people did die."

\* "They put my father in prison," says Pema Wangyal, 33. "But in 1980 he came out of prison and showed up at my wedding here. I didn't even recognize him!"

\* "One day the Chinese came into our homes shooting bullets," said Cheden Khangka, age 39. "We just ran, ran, ran. We never thought we'd go all the way to Nepal!"



A Tibetan nun spins her prayer wheel while a child looks on in the Jawalakhel refugee camp, Kathmandu.

\* "I fought in the Tibetan army to save the Dalai Lama," says Tsering, 64. "In the factory one morning, 160 Chinese came from the mountains. Two hundred Tibetans killed all 160 Chinese. We had American guns and bombs. But when we followed the Dalai Lama to India, they took away our guns and the Dalai Lama called for world peace."

#### THE EXODUS CONTINUES

The imprisonment of Buddhist monks and nuns, many of whom are tortured, continues throughout Tibet, according to reports by the human rights group Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

In March 1989, Tibetans engaged in peaceful demonstrations in the Tibetan

capitol, Lhasa, were fired on by Chinese soldiers, reportedly killing 30 to 60 persons and injuring hundreds. Martial law was declared in Lhasa and its environs until May 1990. There have been subsequent reports of continued mass arrests and mistreatment of Tibetans by Chinese authorities.



Family Portrait. Three generations of Tibetans growing up in a refugee settlement near Swayambhunath shrine in Kathmandu.

Officials with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report that 1,375 Tibetans fled the country between August and December 1990. An equal number are thought to have been caught and turned back at the border.

Tseyang, age 23, fled with her husband in January of this year. "I wanted to reach the Dalai Lama and do what the Dalai Lama says," explains Tseyang, who now lives in a Kathmandu refugee camp. "The Chinese were checking homes to see if we were praying. If they caught us praying, they beat and thrashed us. I will stay in Nepal until Tibet is free."

Tseyang and her husband walked for six months to the Nepal border, seeking protection in the forest each night. "I became so hungry!" she recalls. "The most difficult thing was staying away from the Chinese police at the border. We were lucky: we had nothing for them to steal."

Tibet's natural environment also has suffered under Chinese rule. China mines uranium-rich Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and, it is feared, may also have started dumping nuclear wastes there. The Tibetan government administration in exile accuses the Chinese of agreeing to use Tibet to dispose of toxic waste from other countries to earn foreign exchange.

Another issue of concern is Beijing's policy of "sino-ization" in Tibet, under which millions of ethnic Chinese people have been resettled in Tibet. As a result, there are now 7

million Chinese in Tibet compared with only 6 million ethnic Tibetans, says Paljor Tsering, the representative of the Dalai Lama in Nepal.

"The Chinese may be able to swallow Tibet and completely extinguish the race and culture of Tibet," says Tsering. "Short of that, however, they will never be able to come to terms with the Tibetan people.

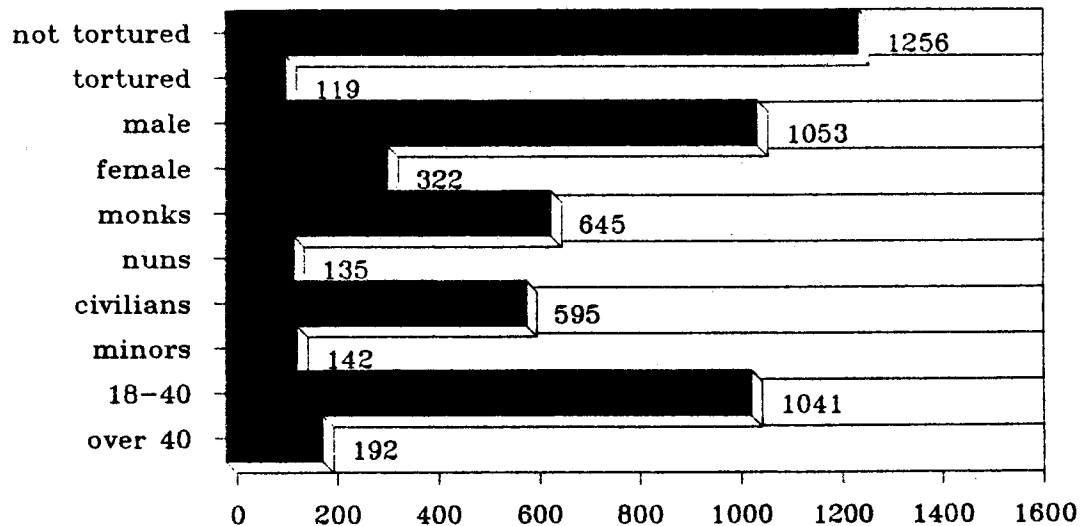
"The next five to ten years will be crucial to preserve Tibetan culture and identity, which has a lot to offer a troubled world," he adds. "It is something the whole world, and especially those who are interested in peace and the environment, should fight for. Unless we act fast, Tibet will be finished."

#### CULTURAL CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN EXILE

The first refugee camps in Nepal were established in the early 1960s under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross and were directed by the Swiss Geologist Toni Hagen. Additional refugee settlements were established in Nepal by the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (3 camps); the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Nepal Red Cross Society (4 camps); and the Government of Nepal (1 camp). In the early 1970s, control over the four Swiss-operated settlements was turned over to the Tibetans themselves. In addition, local

Table I: CHARACTERISTICS OF TIBETAN IMMIGRANTS ARRIVING IN NEPAL: AUGUST - DECEMBER 1990.

Total number = 1,375. [Source: UNHCR]



■ Tibetan new arrival

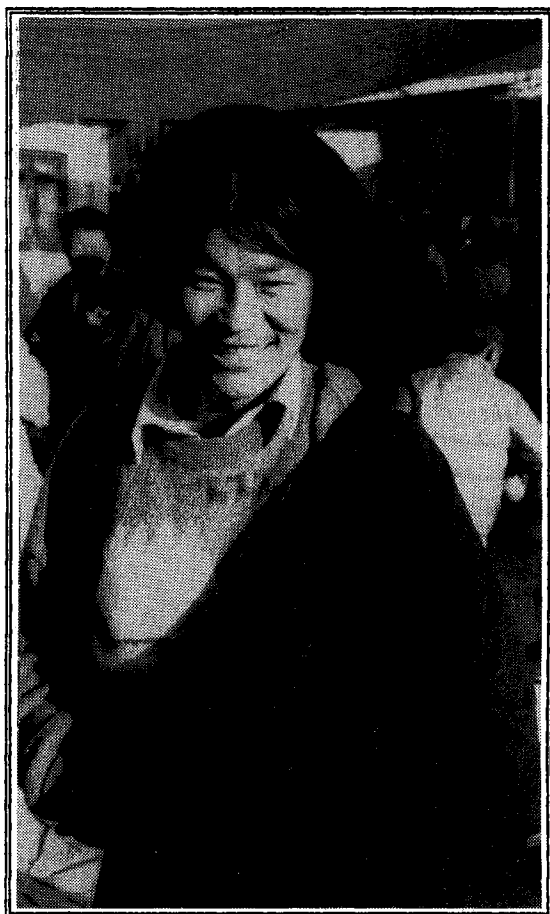
Tibetans established three additional settlements in 1968, 1970 and 1972.

Today, more than one-third of the 14,000 Tibetans in Nepal live in these 12 established settlements.<sup>3</sup> From the beginning, the Tibetan camps were unique in their holistic approach to refugee assistance. Specifically, each camp provided housing, a medical dispensary, a primary school and employment opportunities for the refugees. Early attempts were made to promote agriculture, carpentry and other skills. But the key source of income for virtually all Tibetans in Nepal, both inside and out of the settlements, became the carpet-weaving industry.

Carpet sales and exports are now the primary source of income for the Tibetan community, particularly for those living in the settlements. Hundreds of private carpet factories also have sprung up around Nepal, many of which are run by Tibetans who hire Nepalese laborers. In addition, many Tibetans have gone into the hotel, restaurant and retail business around Nepal, catering to tourists.

One reason for the Tibetans' economic success may have been the relatively small amounts of foreign assistance they received in the early years, says Walter Jutzi, of the Swiss Development Corporation, who has been working with the Tibetans for nearly two decades.

"Tibetans never had an influence on world politics the way the Afghans refugees did," says Jutzi. "The Afghan refugees were



A new arrival at the Jawalakhel refugee camp in Kathmandu. More than 1,300 people fled Tibet in the last four months of 1990.

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<sup>3</sup> 5,111 Tibetans live in established settlements, while 8,889 live outside the camps. Michael G. Keller, Tibetan Women and Children in Nepal, an unpublished report prepared for UNICEF/Nepal. October - November 1990.

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### A PLAN FOR PEACE

The Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his campaign of non-violence to win independence for Tibet. He has proposed the following five-point peace plan as a basis for negotiation with the Beijing government:

- 1) Transformation of Tibet into a zone of peace;
- 2) Abandonment of China's population transfer policy "which threatens the very existence of the Tibetan's as a people."
- 3) Respect for Tibetan people's fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms;
- 4) Restoration and protection of Tibet's natural environment and the abandonment of China's use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping ground for nuclear waste.
- 5) Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese people.

The Dalai Lama also has proposed election of a bi-cameral legislative branch and an independent judicial system. Beijing would continue to control Tibet's foreign policy, including the right to maintain military installations in Tibet until such time as the region can be demilitarized. A special Tibetan-run Foreign Affairs Branch would be created to deal with issues of religion, commerce, education, culture, tourism, science, sports and other non-political activities. Beijing has rejected the plan.

-- Carol Rose

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used by the US to counter their arch-foe. They got huge sums of money and arms, with no need to work. The Tibetans had to make it largely on their own."

Jutzi also credits Tibetan Buddhist philosophy for part of the success. "The religious thinking of this part of the world is one of passive resistance and the religious belief that they will win in the end, that they will return," he says. "And in the meantime, they will make of the best of the situation here."

Karma Tashi, executive secretary of the Snow Lion Foundation, a non-profit Tibetan welfare institution, echoes that philosophy. "We expect to go back to Tibet one day, but we also have to live our lives," he says. "It is natural for us to compete to do better: when you have a bicycle you want a motorcycle; when you have a motorcycle you want a car, and so on."



That same ambition is reflected when Tibetan parents discuss the future for their children. A recent survey of Tibetans in the Kathmandu area shows that nearly 40 percent want their children to become doctors, engineers, or business managers.<sup>4</sup>

"As refugees we have done a lot for Nepal's economy, but the younger people are going to have better professions," says Tinley Paljor, manager of a private carpet exporting company. "The next generation won't work in the factories. They will run the factories."

Yet, economic success has dangers as well as rewards. The major concern among older Tibetans is the loss of their cultural heritage. Preserving Tibetan language and traditions thus ranks high among the concerns of the Tibetan community in exile.<sup>5</sup>

"The idea of going back is still there," says Karma Tashi. "But half of the refugees are in business here, and a whole new generation of Tibetans is growing up in Nepal."

Efforts to preserve traditional culture include Tibetan-run schools in which subjects are taught in Tibetan and English, clinics specializing in traditional Tibetan treatment, and monasteries built to promote the study of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan housing settlements also continue to function as meeting places for the refugee community, particularly during holidays and festivals.

Another sign of Tibetan cultural preservation is the reluctance of refugees to adopt Nepalese citizenship. Few possess the proper documentation to obtain citizenship legally, or money to



Tibetans are raising their children to be doctors and engineers, while maintaining their cultural identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Rose and Thomas Harrington

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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### THE VIEW FROM BEIJING

China's government insists that Tibet has always been a part of greater China, and that the interests of the Tibetan people are protected by the Chinese constitution. An official Chinese government statement issued last September before the United Nations reiterated the Chinese insistence that, "Under the Constitution, all citizens enjoyed an equal status whatever their nationality."

China has a population of 1.4 billion people, including 56 nationalities. Minority groups in China are protected in theory by the Self-Government Laws of Nationality Regions within China, giving autonomous areas with large minorities -- such as Tibet -- great leeway in self-rule. Civil servants who restrict freedom of religion in China are open to punishment. The Chinese government also insists that almost all senior officials of the administration of the Autonomous Region are Tibetans.

Nonetheless, the Chinese government last month lodged a formal complaint over a proposed visit by the Dalai Lama to Nepal. "The Dalai Lama is not an ordinary religious figure but a political exile who has been living abroad, carrying out activities aimed at splitting the motherland and undermining our national unity," said Sun Zhengeai, of the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu. "We resolutely oppose any foreign government or individual instigating or supporting the Dalai Lama in whatever ways to conduct such political activities for undermining the national unity of China."

-- Carol Rose

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obtain it illegally.<sup>6</sup> Yet, even those who have taken Nepalese citizenship appear to have done so primarily for business reasons -- ownership of land and export licenses -- rather than as a sign that they no longer consider themselves Tibetan.

"These kids may wear blue jeans and listen to Rock and Roll, but their sense of being Tibetan isn't lost," says Karma Tashi. "Kids below age 15 have stronger feelings about than the adults, or maybe the adults are just more polite.. But you can really feel it among the kids: That we are Tibetans and we will go back."

In the meantime, Tenzin spends his time like most teenagers: listening to popular music with his friends, studying,

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<sup>6</sup> Tibetan refugees in India are given identity cards, which allow them to move freely and obtain access to government services. In Nepal, lack of citizenship does not appear to impair access to government services or medical care. Keller, op. cit.

watching girls and playing sports (he is a track star at the local Tibetan high school). Next year he hopes to go to college, perhaps in India. He says he might one day return to Nepal to be a teacher at the refugee camp, but only if he can't go to Tibet.

"People in Tibet spend their lives keeping animals for wool, milk and cheese," he says. "There aren't many houses in Tibet. But I think I will like living in a tent."



Change and Continuity: A Tibetan youngster sports sun-glasses and western clothing while adults perform traditional Tibetan dances at the Jawalakhel refugee settlement.

\*\*\* SOURCES FOR ARTWORK \*\*\*

MAP I: The Renaissance of Tibetan Civilization, Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf. Oxford University Press, 1989.

TABLE I: Eugenio Ambrosi, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees .

PHOTOGRAPHS: Thomas Harrington & Carol Rose

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### BREAKING THE DEADLOCK OVER TIBET

In the 40 years since the Chinese occupation, Tibet has not gone unnoticed. In 1960, 1961 and 1965 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a series of resolutions on Tibet in which it expressed "grave concern" that the "fundamental human rights and freedoms of the people of Tibet have been forcibly denied them."

Other international governing bodies have denounced violations of human rights abuses in Tibet, including the International Commission of Jurists (in 1960), the Council of Europe (in 1988) and the European Parliament (in 1987 and in 1989.) The United States Congress adopted resolutions condemning human rights violations in Tibet in 1987, 1988 and 1989.

Despite these repeated international calls for negotiation, however, prospects for a peaceful settlement between the Dalai Lama and China remain dim.

In an effort to break the negotiating deadlock, the international community of Tibet supporters has proclaimed 1991 the International Year of Tibet.

"As Buddhists we believe in truth as the final realization of the self," says Paljor Tsering, the Dalai Lama's representative in Nepal. "International opinion will wake up one day to the truth and justice will prevail.

"Of course," he added, "A trade embargo and economic sanctions might help." -- Carol Rose

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