Darjeeling town is host to one of the oldest refugee centres in the Tibetan Diaspora. Established in October 2nd 1959, the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre (TRSHC) has become one of the most powerful symbols of resilience of the Tibetan community in exile. Unlike the rehabilitation strategy for the permanent agricultural settlements in Southern India which were built at the behest of Tibetan Government-in-exile in Dharamsala and the Government of India, the TRSHC began with the idea that no refugee could ever be rehabilitated in the fullest sense of the word without “Self-Help”, a realization that this “vital element could only come from within the community from within one’s selves”. Guided by the ethic of “Self-Help”, the self-settled Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling town have achieved better integration into a multi-ethnic host society despite the perils of living in protracted exile.

Situated at “Hill-side” Lebong West in the area locally known as “Hermitage”, the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre¹ (TRSHC) in Darjeeling town, India is one of the oldest refugee centres in the Tibetan Diaspora. This refugee settlement came into existence on October 2nd 1959. It initially provided base for distribution of emergency relief to Tibetan refugees who had brought nothing with them apart from the clothes they wore and the little provisions they managed to bring along during their hazardous trek over the Himalayas into India. The “Hill-side”, a small estate comprising 3.44 acres was originally leased and eventually bought from St Joseph’s College. There was space to build and develop a small community at the vicinity of the main town but easily approachable by motor road. The Hill-side had a special significance for Tibetans, for it was here that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had spent his exile in India from 1910 to 1912 following the Chinese invasion of Tibet at that time.²
When the Centre first started in 1959 there were four workers, two males and two females. According to the official website of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, that is, tibet.net, the total population of the settlement in recent times is 650. Under-enumeration in the case of Tibetan refugee populations is a problem at the local level and arises due to the floating nature of such populations. The number of absentees at the time of enumeration at the particular household level remains high. Given below is the population data of TRSHC gathered from local sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>More in number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>486</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the above table, the total population of TRSHC was highest in 1970. The rise in population was due to the steady flow of Tibetan refugees into Darjeeling from Sikkim, few from Lhasa, Shigatse and Amdo province. There has been a steady decline in population of the settlement through the 80s and 90s. In the 90s, there was out-migration of population to Dharamsala and other settlements in India and abroad (America). It is reported that about eight to nine families left for America in the 90s (Official Records, TRSHC Darjeeling). The Welfare Officer mentioned that the reasons for out-migration are for search of better economic opportunities, that is, for livelihood and business.
The table below shows the age-wise distribution of population at TRSHC.

Table 2: Age-wise Distribution of Population at TRSHC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above 85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-84</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-59</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-25</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-13</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Again, the data on age is notoriously unreliable in the older generation of Tibetans. This is because of the Tibetan system of age reckoning. It is not a common practice for Tibetans to celebrate their birthdays.

**Animating the Spirit of Self-Help!**

Driven out of their homeland and into a different environment and without any knowledge of the language, customs and social institutions of the countries where they had sought refuge, the long term rehabilitation of the refugees posed innumerable difficulties. Unlike the rehabilitation strategy for the permanent agricultural settlements like in the South of India which were built at the behest of Tibetan Government-in-exile, the TRSHC began with an altogether different approach to rehabilitation. The comparison with other settlements with regard to the approach is apparent from the statement revealed to me in the initial stages of my research by the Secretary of the Centre who said, “Darjeeling refugee centre does not seek help from Dharamsala. It is independent. Only in need, does it seek assistance. It is not like the refugee centres in the south of India (rgya gar).”

Over time, the TRSHC acquired a simple administrative structure consistent with its ethos of self-help. Besides the President, there is a Secretary and an Assistant Secretary
of the Centre. The Workshops has a Manager and an Assistant Manager. The Hospital has a Doctor-in-charge. There is also a post of an Accountant. The Welfare Officer, who is the representative of the Central Tibetan Administration has under his jurisdiction the Darjeeling Municipal Area and its adjoining areas.

The initial fund for setting up the TRSHC was raised locally by subscriptions, donations, charity shows and an exhibition football match. This was augmented shortly afterwards from contributions from voluntary agencies, notably CARE, Catholic Relief Services, American Emergency Committee for Tibetan Refugees, National Christian Council, The Red Cross, as well as several individuals. With the reception of this aid, the Tibetans who fled from Tibet back then gradually became labeled as refugees. Their ambivalent response to relief programmes in the subsequent years came through in that with client-group compliance and dependency there has also been indifference in the refugees’ reactions to the relief programmes arising out of the resultant perceived loss of dignity of the group.

Given below is an excerpt from the Report which the Secretary of TRSHC showed me during my conversation with him that focused on the Tibetan life-in-exile. “But right from the start, we realized that what was needed was the determination to stand on our feet and rely first and foremost on our own effort – in short, the spirit of Self-Help (rang tsho). It is no exaggeration, in fact, to say that without self-help there can be no rehabilitation, be it economics, social, psychological, cultural or spiritual. Outside assistance is, of course, necessary. But no matter how generous others prove to be, no refugee could ever be rehabilitated in the fullest sense of the word without ‘Self-Help’. And this vital element could only come from within our own community (mi sde) from within our own selves.” This sums up in categorical terms not only the orientation of the inhabitants of TRSHC to life in exile as a whole but also provides a glimpse of the form and the limits to the relationship which they intend to forge with their hosts; other diasporic members of their ethnic group, Non-Governmental Organizations and the State.
Self-Help through Handicrafts

In 1961 the Centre was fully registered as a Charitable Organization under Indian Law. It has also received exemption from income tax on all gifts and donations made to it. The Centre has undertaken multifarious activities ranging from the production of handicrafts and training of artisans and craftsmen to the Homes for the elderly, care for the sick and the orphaned. The production of handicrafts continues to be cornerstone of the Centre’s economy. Besides traditional items such as Tibetan carpets, wood carvings, metal and leather works, the emphasis is also on testing new production lines incorporating traditional Tibetan motifs which would find a ready market in Darjeeling and elsewhere.

The report brought out by TRSHC emphasized that “in traditional Tibet, market for fine handicrafts was limited and master craftsmen who had to undergo long periods of apprenticeship were few. Fewer managed to escape from Tibet and hence it was of the utmost importance for the future of handicrafts that skill and expert knowledge of these masters be passed to a new generation of workers.” This was conveyed by the Manager of the Workshop who pointed to some of the objectives for the promotion of handicrafts. “We impart useful and marketable skills to refugees who would otherwise have to earn a precarious livelihood living as coolies or unskilled workers. Without skilled craftsmen, the centre would not be able to produce and sell handicrafts (lag shes) which provide the main source of income. Training programmes ensure survival and growth of traditional Tibetan arts and crafts.” As exiles who feel that their culture and very identity as Tibetans under siege in their homeland, the replication of Tibetan “tradition” through promotion of art and crafts in the diaspora becomes a self-conscious and strategic undertaking.

There are in total thirteen workshops at the Centre namely, wool sorting; wool washing; wool spinning; wool dyeing; carpet weaving; old workers – ball making; carpet trimming; leather work; tailoring; wool knitting; painting; wood carving; shawl and apron making. Over the past four decades, the Centre has been able to train 1600 persons in various crafts. The objective of training individuals in the various crafts is to make
persons able or self-supporting. About 1000 to 1200 persons have over the four decades left the Centre on their own discretion to set up enterprises. Work is allotted based on skill and ability. The old and the weak are given lighter work. They mainly perform simple chores such as winding thread into balls and caring for the toddlers in the centre's nursery. The familiar sight at the Centre is that of elderly men gathering bundles of wool to be sent to the spinning factory. A homemade wooden ladder with crooked rungs leans against one of the buildings. On top of the building, wool is kept for drying in readiness for the next stage of production. In the spinning room, rows of elderly women feed rolls of wool into a rotating bicycle wheel. In the carpet-weaving hall, young women work in pairs creating Tibetan carpets. Thick white threads are attached vertically between horizontal wooden poles. The weavers painstakingly tie multicoloured threads around each white strand to produce colourful knots and these are then packed tightly together using a heavy bronze comb. The centre's handicraft shop has a large range of items such as placemats, silk wall-hangings and woodcarvings. Handmade carpets are the shop's most popular item and are exported overseas. The waiting period to obtain one of these labour-intensive works of art is six months.

The day’s work at the Centre begins in early morning at 7 and ends at 5 in the evening with lunch and tea break (for an hour from 11 to 12 in the afternoon followed by a tea break at 2). This work schedule is ritualistically followed. The community bell can be heard ringing from even the remotest corner of the Centre which serves to remind the inhabitants of the time to resume and close work.

Housing and the Refugee Label

For the Tibetans their designation as refugees was instrumental in gaining access to important resources. In this process, their aspirations were filtered into the housing programme at TRSHC which they accepted with gratitude. The initial responses of the refugees to housing in the self-help project was one which seemed to indicate settlement in the host society but retaining at the same time a strong belief in “return” (“repatriation” in legal terminology) to Tibet as a paramount and still achievable objective. With more
than four decades into exile, there are few indicators of such temporariness with respect to their attitude towards settlement and resettlement in host societies.

The form and the location of housing at the TRSHC set within the context of rehabilitation have given a distinctive physical identity to the label-refugee. This has accentuated the development of a “refugee consciousness” among the inhabitants of TRSHC. The refugees who fled the invasion of Tibet could not come to Darjeeling in groups but came as individuals leaving their family members, spouses, children, fathers and mothers behind. It was difficult for them to retain their pre-exilic identities drawn upon past norms – community, village, notions of extended family in the housing programme. Exile for the Tibetans prevented village re-formation. The architectural style of the houses at the TRSHC has faint resemblance with the houses in Old Tibet. In 1970, there were wooden sheet houses. By 1990, four buildings with 200 rooms made of brick came up in the area. Tibetans show great interest in indoor decoration. Most families have auspicious patterns on the indoor walls. In the sitting room, the inner wall is painted with blue, green and red stripes respectively representing the sky, the earth and the sea. There are also houses which have altars for worshipping Buddha or images of the Great Kings of Tibet or pictures of the Dalai Lama, the Potala Palace or the Norbulingka. Doors and windows are highlighted with red, blue and white cloth screens, with a canopy (consisting of red, white, blue, yellow and green cloth pieces) around the parapet of the roof and its corners. Housing which becomes the obviously recognizable symbol of their refugee status creates a distinction between refugees and non-refugees, between “the Tibetan refugee” and their “categorical other”.

**We are also a Welfare Institution!**

Since its inception, the Centre has undertaken the task of helping orphans, the aged, the infirm and the needy among the refugees. The Centre has 89 old and infirm persons as well as 42 orphans who have no means of their own. It provides free housing, food, medical care, education for children, pocket money for children, uniform and stationaries. The provision of these services consists of the bulk of the Centre’s expenses.
Another field of welfare work undertaken by the Centre is the medical programme which benefits not only the refugees of the Centre but also the locals. A hospital was established in 1961 through American Relief Services. From a small infirmary, it has grown into a 20 bedded hospital staffed by a well qualified and experienced doctor, 2 nurses and some helpers. A further extension of the medical services offered by the Centre’s hospital is the establishment of an X’Ray Clinic and a Pathological Laboratory in Darjeeling town. In June 1960 the Centre started a small nursery school. Within a short span of time, the school grew up into a full-fledged primary school. The primary school follows the syllabus of the Central Tibetan School Administration and caters up to KG II. The present enrolment in the Primary school is 45 which include children from the nearby Tibetan settlements. The children are not only provided with free education up to class XII but also free clothing, meals and textbooks (Report TRSHC 1999). However those students who continue to receive financial assistance from TRSHC for their college education are required to work for the TRSHC for three to five years (for which they are given remuneration) once they complete their education.

**Medical Care and School**

Another field of welfare work undertaken by the Centre is the medical programme which benefits not only the refugees of the Centre but also the locals. A hospital was established in 1961 through American Relief Services. From a small infirmary, it has grown into a 20 bedded hospital staffed by a well qualified and experienced doctor, 2 nurses and some helpers. Apart from normal consultation and treatment, the Centre’s medical unit carries blood test, screening for T.B., vaccinations, pre-and post-natal care. The overwhelming majority of those who avail of the medical facilities themselves are poor. A further extension of the medical services offered by the Centre’s hospital is the establishment of an X’Ray Clinic and a Pathological Laboratory in Darjeeling town. The X’Ray Clinic consisting of a small unit along with the requisite generator was set up by a grant given by the Government of West Bengal through the Hill Affairs Branch Secretariat, Darjeeling. The clinic is entirely staffed by trained boys and girls of the Refugee Centre.
In June 1960 the Centre started a small nursery school. Within a short span of time, the school grew up into a full-fledged primary school. The primary school follows the syllabus of the Central Tibetan School Administration and caters up to KG II. The present enrolment in the Primary school is 45 which include children from the nearby Tibetan settlements. Shortage of funds has forced the Centre to severely limit the admission. The junior and senior students attend the different schools and colleges in and out of Darjeeling town. The children are not only provided with free education up to class XII but also free clothing, meals and textbooks (Report TRSHC 1999). However those students who continue to receive financial assistance from TRSHC for their college education are required to work for the TRSHC for three to five years (for which they are given remuneration) once they complete their education. If they get a better employment offer during this period, they have to pay back the amount received for their college education to the TRSHC. At present there are 7 Tibetan students employed by TRSHC under this scheme (Office Records, Welfare Office, TRSHC, Darjeeling).

The Central School for Tibetans Administration was set up as an autonomous organization by a resolution of the government of India, Ministry of Education and Youth services (New Ministry of Human Resource Development) in 1961 and was registered under the Societies Registration Act (XXI of 1860). The Central School for Tibetans, Darjeeling was set up in 1961. Initially the school was in the N.B.M.R. building which belonged to Ministry of Defence and other rented buildings ‘Digpatia’, ‘Ray Villa’ and ‘Kailash’. The N.B.M.R. building had been taken over by the Tibetan School Society which was also set up in 1961. By 1966, N.B.M.R. had been demolished and the new block with ten class rooms and a multi purpose hall was constructed. Later the Administration constructed a three storied building which today houses a girls dormitory, dispensary, senior class rooms, science laboratory, dispensary, music and dance room. Later, next to the ten class rooms another building had come up which was meant for primary classrooms and class VIII and IX. The first principal, Lhawang Paljor started the school with 30 students and five teachers in 1961. At present there are 518 students and 42 staff. Affiliated to C.B.S.E. the school offers course in Humanities and Commerce.
Special emphasis is laid on preservation and promotion of Tibetan culture, protection of environment and inculcation of human values. Career Counseling too receives equal importance with trained staff with frequent visit of Department of Education, Dharamsala counselor.

**Concluding Remarks**

The visible success in charting out a life-in-exile became a source of worry for the Tibetan refugees. They knew that their achievement did create what they often say, feelings of “jealousy, envy and deprivation” among locals. For Tibetan refugees, sensitivity to potentially hostile feelings of locals in Darjeeling town is deemed crucial in order to maintain order and security. The TRSHC has become one of the most powerful symbols of resilience for the Tibetan community in exile. It symbolized overcoming of the state of poverty and stigmata arising out of exile and the cultivation of an ethic-in-exile. “Self-Help” among the Tibetans in Darjeeling town offered the means for improving despite the refugee label.

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Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre at present
Workshop for Old and Infirm
Home for the Orphans
The Elderly at the TRSHC
Carpet Weaving
Early group of refugees
End Notes

1 The address of the Registered Office of the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre is: 65, Gandhi Road, Darjeeling – 734101, West Bengal, India. The field study in Darjeeling town was spread over a period of two years (2004-2006), totaling six months: October-November 2004 in Darjeeling; May 2005 in Darjeeling; April 2006 in Dharamsala; October-November 2006 in Darjeeling

2 The reference to Thirteenth Dalai Lama’s association with “Hill-side” Darjeeling by some of the inhabitants of TRSHC was suggestive of the symbolism that is consequential in enabling them to live the present in terms of the past.

3 The coolies or unskilled workers who form the backbone of the Darjeeling economy belong to the Nepali community of Darjeeling. In contrast to the Nepalis, the occupations that the Tibetans could pursue signified for them a certain self-attestation of a perceived sign of progress.

4 The Centre has been able to train 1600 persons in various crafts, of which 1000 to 1200 persons have left the Centre to set up their own enterprises (Report TRSHC 1999).

5 Houses in TRSHC have small windows like the blockhouses which were the most common type of civilian housing in Old Tibet. Blockhouses had flat roofs and small windows. These houses were usually of two storeys – the wall base is laid with stone and the upper part is earth-piled solid.

6 “Most of the orphans have been sent to various schools across India and several have been sponsored for study abroad. With the generous help of several individuals scattered all over the world, the Centre has been …able to lay the foundation for their future” (Report TRSHC).

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