

BOOK REVIEW

Ann Armbrrecht Forbes, *Settlements of Hope: an Account of Tibetan Refugees in Nepal*. Cultural Survival Report 31, Cambridge, Mass.: Cultural Survival Inc., 1989. 170 + xiii pages; foreword by H.H. the Dalai Lama; maps and monochrome photographs, Price: US\$ 10.

The publication of this book, a result of eighteen months' research in Nepal, coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet. The immediate concern of many of the eighty thousand or so Tibetans who followed him into exile was their sheer physical survival: how, after running the gauntlet of high passes, bitter cold and insistent liberators would they find enough to eat and, in most cases, weather the lowland's diseases until such time as it was possible to go home? As the years, and then the decades, passed, and it became evident that the exile was more than a transit between phases of Tibetan independence, the uncertainty about survival shifted from the individuals – whose subsistence at least was assured – to the culture as a whole.

Increasingly, the national flag must be carried by people who have never been to the country. The author's view on the continuity of Tibetan culture in exile is unambiguous:

Every refugee inherits a profound sense of responsibility to uphold these values and to live up to the trust of those in Tibet. It is up to every individual to keep Tibetan national and cultural identity alive. An understanding of this responsibility and a sense of the urgency involved must be instilled in the generation of children now in school. If the flame of nationality is lost, than [*sic*] the hope of a freed Tibet will slip away: the refugees will have betrayed their countrymen and will have cut the bonds that also serve to hold together their cultural integrity (132).

But the burden of patriotism does not always sit lightly, especially where it conflicts with the economic interests of individuals. There can be little doubt that the great majority of Tibetans, including second-generation immigrants, retain a strong sense of cultural identity; but when Tibetans who have left the refugee fold, made good in Europe or the United States, are obliged to choose between the best care and education for their close

relatives on the one hand and the interests of their unknown compatriots on the other, choices about commitment and compromise must surely be an individual matter. While Forbes champions the cause of Tibetan nationalism the individual perspectives are never obscured by the abstraction of ideals and causes.

A book on the subject of Tibetan refugees could very easily have degenerated into another useful report, and although the work is billed as a report in the publisher's description it is more than that. Forbes avoids aridity by her consistent use of cameo scenes to illustrate or introduce general issues, an approach that speaks more eloquently than any number of tables about the real meaning of exile. Her biographical sketches in particular convey a sense of continuity – and discontinuity – on either side of 1959, and cover a fair spectrum of Tibetan society from carpet-weavers to the Dalai Lama himself. The Tibetan leader emerges from the chaos of refugee camps, cultural disintegration and modernisation as the archetype of the perfect Tibetan exile whose life 'proves that the important qualities of Tibetan culture as it existed on the Tibetan plateau continue to hold true in of a world technology'. But the qualities that Forbes attributes to him are not merely a structural device. In a very real sense he is the personification of the stuff that binds the exile community together:

This connection, this bond with the sacred, is the single most important quality in Tibetan culture and, in turn, in Tibetan national identity. This sense of the spirit, which is embodied in the Dalai Lama, has strengthened the Tibetan community and enabled it to remain united despite the devastation of the Tibetan homeland by the Chinese Communists and the subtle encroachments of Western values since the Tibetans' arrival in exile (2).

On the other hand the author shows herself mercifully free (or perhaps freed) of the a priori supposition, common enough among Westners, that Tibetans and their spiritual leaders can do no wrong. She admits honestly enough that 'the illusion that the people of Tibet held answers to unresolved issues in my own life certainly influenced my decision to spend time in their communities', but adds that she 'quickly discovered that... the Tibetans are, simply, people: they argue and fight and make mistakes; they are wrong as often as they are right; they disappoint as much as any Westerner'. The author's appraisal of the Dalai Lama's qualities is a considered judgment, and the publication of the book shortly before his reception of the Nobel Peace Prize is timely.

One advantage of the absence of sentimentality – apart from the fact that it inspires the reader's confidence – is that the author has no reason to be shocked out of compassion when refugees show a tendency to behave like human beings. The exasperation of people dedicated to the refugee cause becomes understandable in the context of the Tibetans' lack of cooperation arising from their hierarchical preoccupations. It is not only foreign individuals and organisations that Forbes implicitly commends for their efforts. Much of the praise

goes to Nepal, the generous host of those refugees with whom *Settlements of Hope* is specifically concerned.

It is easy enough to criticise bungling and obstructive officialdom, but one of the chief merits of this book is its constructive attempt to situate the problems of Tibetan refugees squarely in the context of the Nepalese reality. Like it or not, the fate of the exile community is linked to the kingdom's fortunes, from the vagaries of the educational system to the unavailability of wool for carpet-making thanks to the closure of the Indian frontier. And if the forcible muting of Tibetan festivities in Kathmandu seems objectionable it is worth remembering the adage, attributed to the nation's founder, about Nepal being a yam squashed between two rocks, and for a country in such a delicate position the pressure is better not ignored. Even the democratic euphoria still in evidence at the time of writing this review [1990] may provoke ambivalent feelings: the proliferation of red flags and communist slogans in the streets of Kathmandu will not be greeted with unqualified exuberance by Tibetans with long memories.

(Incidentally the country is not as badly squashed by the two rocks as page 18 might suggest: the figure of 54,362 'square meters' probably has its roots in a library note of '54,362 sq.m.' or something of the sort, and the 'm.' was later written out as metres instead of miles. A number of other oddities and unusual anglicisations have managed to survive the editorial net: Kailesh, Ting'gri, Koirela, Kalimpong, *dhal* (for *dal*), *chubba* (for *chuba*: Tib. *'phyupa*), *tzi* (for *zi*: Tib. *gzi*), and the remark on page 67 that 'in India where many Indians [read: Tibetans] were already well established in business...'.)

Forbes bravely addresses one of the most difficult issues arising from the story of Tibetan settlement in Nepal, namely the paradox of providing aid to refugees in areas where the indigenous community is just as badly off:

Disasters make news and, in heightened public awareness, attract money, food, and medicine to regions previously overlooked by donor dollars. Refugees are given food while those on whose land they are allowed to settle remain on the back pages and continue to go hungry (20).

The dilemma is particularly great for organisations such as the International Committee for the Red Cross, whose special concern is with victims of war 'and other disasters'. While the definition of disaster in this case must be narrowed down to the fact of being in exile, rather than the less dramatic condition of citizenship in one of the world's poorest countries, turning a blind eye to the indigenous poverty would have been callous. But, by Forbes's account, the agencies involved seem to have acquitted themselves well in this difficult matter.

The story of refugee aid programmes carries lessons that go beyond the limits of the Tibetan context. The matter of cultural appropriateness is illustrated by the failure of poultry

farming projects which were soon abandoned in the face of Buddhist reluctance to bred birds and eggs for the table. Even carpet weaving, which was adopted because of its Tibetan antecedents, its compatibility with religious principles and the fact that its own unexpected problems: the excellent idea of producing carpets bearing the syllables OM MANI PADME HUM fell into disfavour when it dawned on the manufacturers that this most sacred mantra would be walked upon by the buyers (57).

More revealing is the observation by a Nepalese employee of SATA that “the Tibetan habit is such that if you give to them they will always say give us more” (59). The moral is, of course, that the habit is not just a Tibetan one. Anyone who has worked in development at the village level in Nepal (and no doubt anywhere else) will appreciate that ‘development’ – *vikas* – often comes to be understood as a synonym for ‘handout’, a predictable cynicism when the mechanics of aid allows the beneficiaries no direct participation in the improvement of their lot. As Forbes shows, the most successful economic strategies are those in which the producers themselves have a vested interest, whether this takes the form of being paid for piecework rather than by the hour, or holding shares in enterprises.

The relative prosperity of the Nepal-based entrepreneurs is regarded with a certain ambivalence in the wider Tibetan community, who see this wealth at once as a ‘a source of cultural preservation and a cause for cultural dissipation’ (65). Refugee settlements may be enclaves of traditionalism and the best guarantee of cultural continuity, but the fact is that they are not the most stimulating environment for an ambitious new generation. Chapter 12 gives a poignant portrait of Chailsa, a once-vibrant settlement that now has an abandoned, skeletal quality about it.

The religious dimension of this ‘cultural dissipation’ is something that the reader may feel could have received more detailed treatment. Dharmasala’s anxieties about the standards of Kathmandu’s monasteries are mentioned briefly (123-124) but – Perhaps out of discretion – Forbes limits her observations to certain censorial remarks on the part of the Dalai Lama and his personal secretary. *Settlements of Hope* is the thirty-first in a series of publications from the organisation Cultural Survival, which ‘works to raise public awareness of the human rights of tribal groups and ethnic minorities around the world’. Given the confines of the publishers’ requirements the book cannot really be expected to tackle such broad issues as the direction of Tibetan monasticism and even Buddhism in exile, especially since this would require a perspective extending well beyond Nepal. By the same token a too-detailed examination of internal religious politics probably exceeds the book’s brief and the author’s interests. Take, for example, the case of Dhorpatan refugee camp, whose inhabitants ‘were, and continue to be, notorious among other refugees for their “roughness” and their inability to get along with others’ (74-75). In the author’s summary of the problems besetting this camp one possibly crucial point is not mentioned: Dhorpatan was a focus for followers of the Bon religion, whose tradition occasions as much misunderstanding among Tibetans as it does among Westerners. One wonders if a large part

of Dhorpatan's sinister reputation is not one of the *idées reçues* perpetuated by the Buddhist folklore about Bon. The Dhorpatan community was not really given a fighting chance. The most promising leader of the settlement, lama Tshultrim Nyima, was murdered in 1962. There is reasonable evidence to suggest that the killing was carried out at the instigation of a faction within the Tibetan government in exile with the specific aim of preventing the Bonpos from organising themselves. Until his own death last year, the probable killer occupied a respectable position in Dharmasala. In the event, the Bonpos did manage to establish a highly successful settlement and monastery in India, near Shimla, and work on their new monastery on the outskirts of Kathmandu is nearly complete.

There is a sequel to the story which is worth relating because it accords nicely with Forbes's presentation of the Dalai Lama as both *deus ex machina* and centre of gravity for the Tibetan exiles irrespective of their sectarian affiliation. The Tibetan leader made his first visit to the Bonpo community in India in 1989 and was duly impressed by both the discipline and the standard of the debating. After spending some time at a less tightly-run monastery of one of the Buddhist sects during the same tour he pulled up the monks of that establishment with a reference to the famous magical contest in which Milarepa demonstrated his superiority over the Bonpo Naro Bonchung. 'If the contest were held today', he is reported as saying, 'I am not so sure that the Bonpos would be the losers'.

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