

# The Socio-Economic conditions and Political status of Tibetan Refugees in Chandragiri, Odisha: A case study

Deepika Chettri

Assistant Professor, Department of Defence Studies, Susilkar College, Kolkata

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Phuntsokling Tibetan Settlement situated in the remote corner of the southern part of Behrampur, Odisha has its own unique attributes. Tibetan migration to Chandragiri began from 1963. The settlement comprises of five camps. Its Multi-Purpose Co-operative Society functions as a lifeline of these camps. The Tibetan community lives here among locals with contrasting culture and traditions, yet they have thrived successfully in the society. Their cultural and political adjustment with the local population is well inscribed with their economic gains and adaptability with the environment. This article thus, discusses the socio-economic condition and political status of the Tibetan refugees in Chandragiri, Odisha.*

**Key Words:** *Tibetans, Refugees, Phuntsokling settlement, Indian citizenship.*

## INTRODUCTION:

Chandragiri is a small town which is located 80 kilometers away from Behrampur, a southern town in Odisha. The town is placed amidst lush tropical forests, mountains slopes and hilltops. The presence of the Tibetan community even in such a remote area in Odisha adds more beauty to the place. Tibetan culture, religious traditions and their survival in such an unorthodox climate often makes this place more attractive for the local tourists. Chandragiri as a place remains unexplored by the outsiders.

The establishment of a Tibetan refugee settlement began in Chandragiri from 1<sup>st</sup> May 1963 in the Gajapati district of Odisha. After provisions were made by the State Government to relocate and rehabilitate the Tibetan refugees, The Tibetans started arriving here in batches. The Government of Odisha compassionately welcomed the Tibetans in their state and provided a land of about 2500 acres to them which would be enough to ensure food, shelter and livelihood. This favor on the part of the government towards them was aimed at build an economically self-supporting community during their period in exile. The Tibetan settlements in Chandragiri are divided into five camps, each at a distance of about 4-5 kilometers. Chandragiri (camp-I), Tankilipadar (camp-II), Lobarsingi (camp-III), Jiranga (camp-IV) and Mahendragada (camp- V), all these five camps are together known as The "Phuntsokling Tibetan Settlement". *Phuntsokling* in Tibetan means 'land of happiness and plenty'. This settlement is among the agriculture based settlements in India.

The representative office acts as The Chief Local Justice Commissioner of the settlement. The entire Tibetan community elects one Representative Officer through voting. The overall responsibility of the settlement is vested upon the representative officer of the camp. All five camps have their elected leader who acts as an agent to link the representative office and the people of the camp. There are about 4000 Tibetans residing in the Phuntsokling settlement. The Local Tibetans Assembly is the highest legislative organ of the settlement.

## Multi-Purpose Tibetan Co-operative Society

The Multi Purpose Tibetan Co-operative Society (MTCS) is one of principle machineries of the Phuntsokling Tibetan settlement. The MTCS was founded on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1966 under The Registration Act of the Govt. of Odisha. The society is managed by the law of the society through electoral processes. It elects its Boards of Directors for a period of three years. The secretary is responsible for the smooth functioning of the society. The MTCS runs a dairy, horticulture, health centre, mechanical workshop, noodle factory, an old age home, crèche, schools and a monastery. Overall, it can be called as a lifeline and support system for the Tibetans living in the settlement.

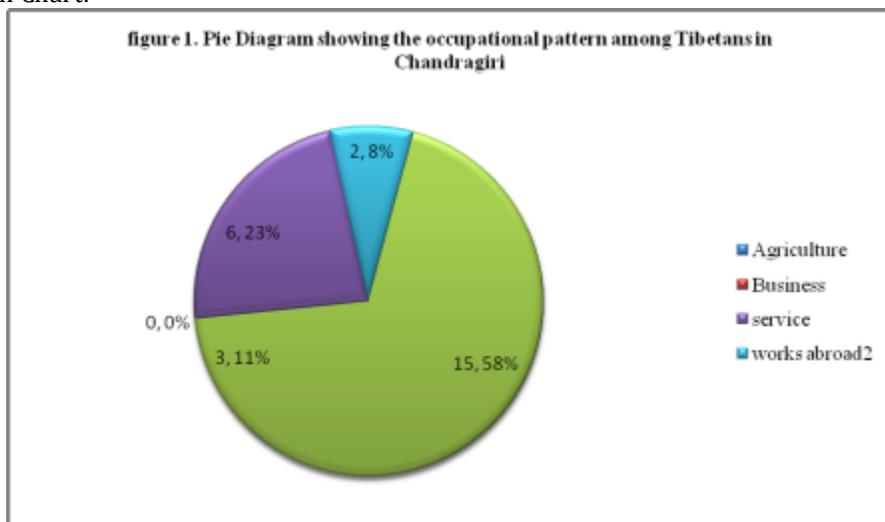
As the name stands, the MTCS has multiple functions. It runs the Phuntsokling Tibetan bungalow which is the only hotel in the place. The society supplies water to all five camps. It runs a noodle factory where noodles are manufactured and sold in local markets. There is a day care centre for children where parents can leave their children while they are at work. It also runs bus services for the school children as the school is about five kilometers away from each camp. The office of the society also rents trucks for agricultural purposes.

Being an agriculture based settlement, the mechanical workshop or tractor section provides with tractor facilities to the people for harrowing the land, intercultural operations, and threshing of crops. As maize is the main agricultural product of the place, the society takes overall responsibility of the marketing processes. It collects all the maize from the agriculturists and supplies it to the traders in Bhubaneswar. It looks over all the financial conditions of the people in the settlement. It sanctions loans for agriculture, education of children and also for health care.

The MTCS even sanctions loans for the ones who wish to go abroad for work. It gives about 3.5 lakh rupees to an individual if they seek loans from the society but the person has to repay the loan in the allotted time. The society runs The Central Tibetan School in Chandragiri. The school is located at camp 3, running from class 6 to the 12<sup>th</sup> standard. There are two other branch schools at camp 5. The MTCS along with the representative office runs crèche and Montessori. There is also a school hostel facility for the poor students and for those who have to walk many kilometers to reach the school.

There is also a Tibetan Handicrafts Co-operative Society Ltd. This was established to preserve the traditional cultural heritage of the Tibetans and also to provide income to them. Unfortunately it is closed now due to the unavailability of a carpet weaver in the settlement.

The Occupation Chart:



Out of the 45 Tibetans surveyed in Chandragiri, Odisha, a total of 31 people practiced agriculture, out of which 16 were females while the remaining 15 were males. The fact that the Tibetan refugees were farmers and nomads back in Tibet provided agriculture to be the best and the most suitable occupation for them to take up in exile. Eventually with hard labour they succeeded in transforming the barren land of Chandragiri into fertile and cultivable lands. Agriculture is the primary source of income among Tibetans in Chandragiri. Maize is the major crop and besides, other fruits are also cultivated. Moreover, this place is called The 'Maize bowl of the State'. Tibetans earn their livelihood through maize cultivation and other seasonal fruits and flowers. Both males and females work as equivalently in the field and business sectors.

Besides agriculture and business, 3 males Tibetans were also engaged in seasonal sweater business from October to January in different places of India like Dalhousie, Dehradun, Delhi, Kolkata and Chandigarh. They import all the woollen items from Ludhiana and sell those in different Indian states. They mostly sell sweaters, jackets, gloves and jeans, but this business is carried out only when they finish their agriculture work. They practice this for extra income which is used for the education of their children and health care.

The people in Chandragiri are engaged in services of the administrative offices of both The CTA and The Cooperative Society. It was found that 6 male and 3 females were engaged in services. 'Service', refers to those Tibetans working in The CTA offices like camp managers, caretakers of the old age home, nurses in the health centre and the school teachers.

While surveying, it was found that there were 3 Tibetan youths who have travelled abroad to work in order to support their family back home. They come home once or twice a year. The Cooperative Society provides them with loans in order to go abroad for work. It also helps in arranging other official works required to travel abroad. Hence, many educated youths have migrated to foreign countries to earn.

People in this camp used to practice carpet weaving and handicraft as their primary means of livelihood, but the handicraft and carpet centre is now closed down due to the unavailability of skilled weavers. In addition, educated youths of now are less interested in such kinds of employment. Photographs of the Agricultural land:



Agriculture land



Fruit orchard

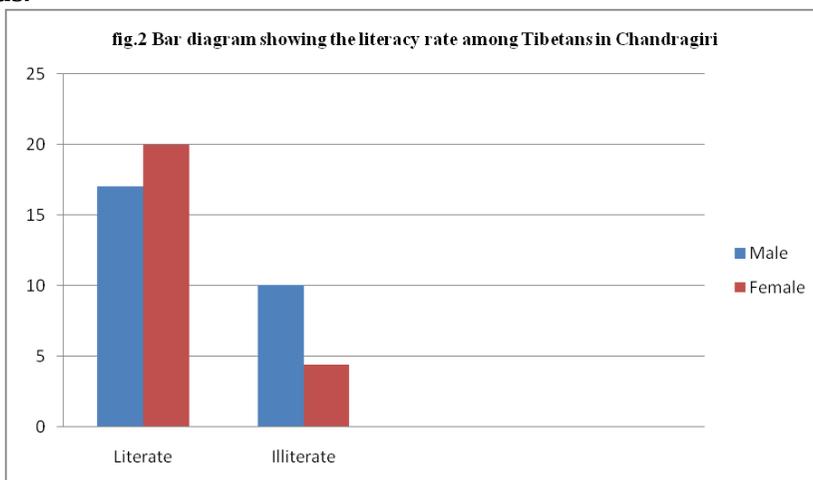


Granaries of Maize



A Ware House

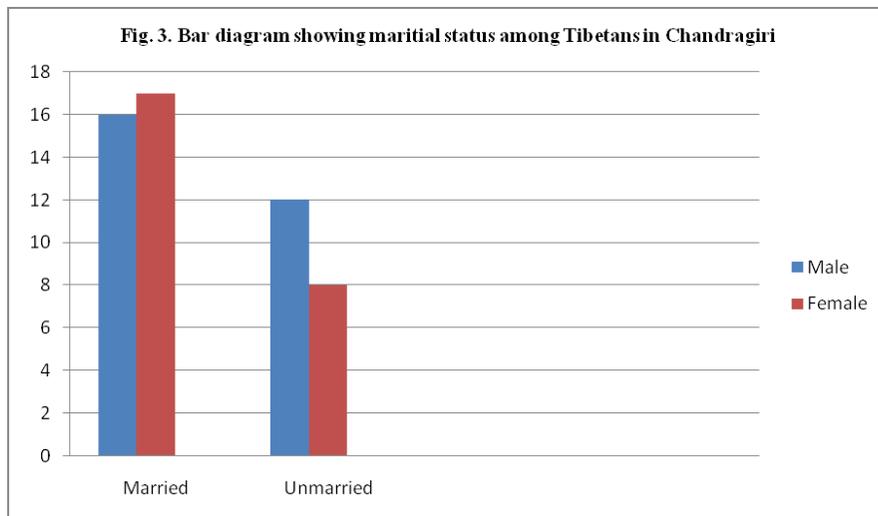
**Educational status:**



Literacy rate among the females is more compared to that of males in Chandragiri. Even the second generation women are more literate than men. They are more responsible in running the house and they work hand in hand with men, both in the household and the outdoors. They have equal share in everything. Men are less literate because of the unawareness of education among them and also due to household

responsibilities. But the present scenario is different. At present, due to the life experiences of the parents, children go to school at any cost. They are very concerned about the education of their young members. There is a Central School for Tibetans in camp no.5. The school bus runs through each camp provided by the administration. They also provide free education and other facilities for the under privileged children. After finishing the school, most of the students from Chandragiri enroll themselves in The University of Chennai. Some of the students go to Delhi and Bengaluru for professional courses. The ones who are not interested in further education get engaged in their family business and start contributing to their families. Also, a few youths have travelled to foreign countries to work after graduation. Now the Phuntshokling Cooperative Society gives them financial assistance in the form of Loans under certain conditions. This trend of migrating to foreign countries is now quite common. This is due to the fact that the educated youths do not want to stay in a small place and want to travel. They also do not want to get into agriculture. They have different expectations out of their life, unlike their parents. Many educated youths believe that education and world exploration are the ingredients to bring back the glory of Tibet and its independence. They have been learning a lot about politics and its processes living in India and if they get an opportunity to travel, apart from simply earning their livelihood, they will educate themselves and become politically sound in order to fight for the freedom of Tibet.

### Marital Status:



According to the data presented above, the percentage of married females is high compared to that of the males. The Tibetan society also runs on patriarchal norms. Women are more family oriented so women tend to get married at an early age. Women bear most of the household responsibilities which is the reason why they get married. On the other hand, the percentage of unmarried male members is high due of unemployment. People in Chandragiri are more engaged in agriculture which makes their life difficult and uncertain in terms of earning. They sometimes feel incompetent in managing their family so they refuse to start their own families. During the field work it was found that Tibetans living at the camps have similar types of problem and the justification was the same regarding their hesitation towards marriage. At present, there are some people from the camps who have migrated to foreign countries and settled abroad. Here, the detailed data on the housing type of The Tibetans is nil. Though it is a settlement but all the houses are owned by themselves on the leased land provided by the government. They have to pay annual rent to the state Government. There is no single Tibetan Refugees having dual citizenship or the percentage of Tibetans taking up Indian citizenship in Chandragiri is zero as all of them retain their refugee status.

### Social and religious life

Tibetan refugees in Chandragiri are highly religious. It is reflected in their daily lives as in any other place in India. There are small monasteries in each camp. The Phuntsokling settlement observes The Tibetan New Year, birth anniversary of The Dalai Lama, Tibetan National Uprising Day, Tibetan democracy day and also The Indian Independence Day and Republic day of India in the settlement. Almost all religious activities are carried out collectively in the monastery located inside each camp. Like any other Tibetan, religion plays a major role in their social, cultural and political life.

The representative office also runs an old age home. This home supports the senior citizens who have no one to look after them. It has all amenities- housing, prayer hall, dining and a big lawn with about thirty old people as its members. The caretaker looks after the management of the home. The members of the camps volunteer in taking care of the surroundings of this home. The Tibetan refugees in Chandragiri are rich in terms of socio-cultural set-up. They have been trying to preserve their culture in the society.

Tibetan refugees coming from an entirely different climatic and cultural background having to adapt into a new tropical weather, in an alien land was not an easy task, but with time and need, they have successfully acclimatized with the conditions in Odisha. Today they are one of the best acclimatized and content refugee groups in India.

Glimpses of the social life of the Tibetans in the camp:



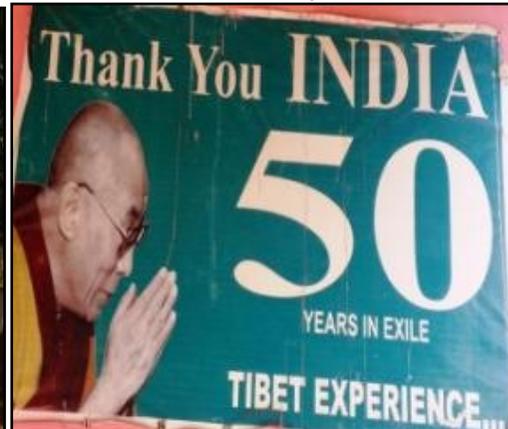
Monastery Committee members



Monastery Kitchen



An Old Age Home



Poster in a Camp



Monastery in camp no. 4



Houses in camp.no 2

Chandragiri belongs to the tribal people of Odisha. This place also has some Moist (Insurgent group) present, so this area is politically disturbed. Despite this, in such an environment Tibetans have adapted well. Although they have the full support and cooperation of the government, sometimes tension arises among the local people and the Tibetans. Actually to understand the case, (according to the respondents) the local people are in fact jealous of the Tibetans because of their economic achievements. Tibetans are financially sound compared to the local community. The market business of Chandragiri is also dominated by them. The local people are in poor conditions, both in terms of living standard and economy. Tibetans are the main consumers of the local traders too. They entirely depend upon Tibetans for the smooth running of their businesses. Many poor locals are hired by them in the agricultural field as laborers and women as housemaids. In fact, locals do all the manual jobs for Tibetans. So naturally, some local goons have extreme hatred and jealousy towards the Tibetans there. They sometimes come into open confrontation with them. Many such incidents are reported. In order to solve such cases, Tibetan officials have made some political arrangements with the local political parties. In spite of it, such cases have been reported several times in Chandragiri.

Whatever the situation may be, Tibetans have been leading better life than any other Tibetan refugee communities elsewhere in India. Being situated in a remote area, few problems exist in terms of communication and improper healthcare facilities in case of serious illnesses. Still, life in Chandragiri is easy and satisfying than any other settlement according to the opinion of some people there. There is a sense of peace here. Tibetans here love this place and they perform lots of social work for the local people like free health camps, cleaning and beautifying the area etc. after all, this place is their home until they return back.

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