

BOOK REVIEW

Russell, Jeremy. *Dharamsala, Tibetan Refuge*. Roli Books / Lustre Press, M-75, Greater Kailash – II, New Delhi. Pp. 96. Price Rs 395.

Jeremy Russell's *Dharamsala – Tibetan Refuge* provides a succinct account of Dharamsala and the Tibetan religious and cultural institutions of the area. The descriptions are interspersed with excellent photographs.

The book focuses on the Tibetan refugees who came to India in the wake of political turmoil in their country in 1959. About 80,000 Tibetans followed their leader the Dalai Lama and sought refuge in India. Ever since, they have been staying in India in exile, in settlements spread over the different states. Dharamsala is the center of their administrative and religious activities. It is home of the Dalai Lama, the highest spiritual Guru of the Tibetans and is the seat of the Tibetan government in exile.

The book offers a condensed account of the history of Dharamsala, starting from the end of the first century BCE's archaeological records which suggest the co-existence of Buddhism and Hinduism in the area. To escape from the scorching heat of the plains, Dharamsala was founded by the British army as a garrison for their troops in 1846. Soon the civilian population moved in and within a few years, a full-fledged British settlement came up. The place was so well liked by Lord Elgin, the Viceroy from 1800 to 1863, that he wanted it to become the summer capital of India. After the Indian Independence in 1947, the British left Dharamsala. According to Russell many British had plans to stay on in the area but the horror of partition shattered their dreams. After the British left India, Dharamsala became an obscure deserted hill station till the Tibetans arrived in 1960.

Russell tries to capture through his camera the struggle and the success of the Tibetans to create a new life in exile. To preserve their identity the Tibetans have tried to rebuild the important institutions of Tibetan culture, art and religion. And Dharamsala, 'denoting the place of rest for the pilgrims' has lived up to its name, by providing succor and home 'away from home'

for the Tibetans. The book provides a glimpse of the Tibetan cultural and religious institutions in the area. The famous monasteries like the Namgyal, the Nechung, the Dolma Ling Nunnery, Tibetan Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, secular institutions like Parliament, Library, Supreme Court and Men Tsee Khang (traditional Tibetan medicine and astrology institute) and cultural centers like Tibetan children's Village, Tibetan Institute of performing arts, and the Norbulingka Institute (for preservation of Tibetan Art) which the Tibetans have built in exile have been described by Russell. The only important place left out by him is the Tibet museum. Maybe when Russell was writing the book, the museum was still under construction. Russell also briefly notes the Hindu Temples around this area.

Glossy, colorful photographs extend an invitation to the reader to visit the place. The bit of history thrown in goes to make the description very interesting. The grand view of the Dauladhar range, the marooned robbed Tibetan Lamas, the anxious looks of the newly arrived refugees, the innocent faces of the Tibetan babies, the grand and majestic view of the Shakyamuni Buddha with His Holiness seated in front praying, the Tibetan craftsman at work, the intricately designed Thangkas, all look very much alive and real. Russell, however, is quite charitable in his description of Dharamsala. He overlooks its darker side. The paradise on earth is no longer the 'paradise' as it used to be due to environmental degradation. The rampant encroachment of the forestland and large scale building activities have threatened the fragile ecosystem of the area. Some of the hotels are dangerously perched on the slopes of the hillocks. They have greatly multiplied the chances of landslide in the area. One can see heaps of garbage, polyethene bags and other waste material dumped on the slopes. Tourism, which is the main stay of the economy, has not been so good for the environment. Tibetans stay in the area has also not been so uneventful. There is lot of resentment among a section of the local population,

which has remained relatively poor. Although the Tibetans arrived as guests, now it is they who employ the locals. The 1994 riot, when the local hoodlums destroyed Tibetan property is the grave reminder of the tense ethnic situation in the area. Perhaps, the scope of the book didn't warrant such discussion.

Overall the book is an excellent pictorial ac-

count of the richness of Tibetan culture and their success in changing an isolated, sleepy and non-descript hill station to a place which is known today as the Little Lhasa.

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