

Forty-five years have passed since the first group of Tibetans followed His Holiness the Dalai Lama into exile in India. Families fled from Tibet taking with them only whatever they could carry over treacherous and little-known passes in the high Himalayas, anxious to escape from the oppression of Chinese rule.

Soon the number of exiles rose to 80,000; it is now 130,000 and the exodus continues. They are resettled in many countries all over the world, but mainly in India where the Government of India allocated an acre of land per person for resettlement and provided facilities for schools, hospitals and social welfare. The Governments of Nepal and Bhutan also provided generous assistance for the resettlement of numerous refugees. In the initial stages, many refugees earned their livelihood from manual labour such as road construction in the border areas and traditional handicrafts, while a few made their way to Europe and North America.

The exiles found themselves in an environment very different from that of their homeland – the cold, bare, thinly populated Roof of the World. Most of them settled in the plains of India, as had so many other immigrant groups before them throughout the long history of the subcontinent. However, unlike these groups, the Tibetan exiles did not assimilate themselves into Indian society. They harmoniously co-existed with the locals but held on proudly to their Tibetan identity. They continue to do so even today, although their children have been born in exile and have not seen their motherland.

This was not because they encountered hostility in India. On the contrary, their Buddhist faith had, in fact, originated in India. But, over the centuries, the Tibetans had evolved a distinctive culture, society and a way of life suited to their remote surroundings and Mongolian stock. Their language and dress were noticeably different, though the Buddhist roots were common.

Less than a year after seeking refuge in India and when the Dalai Lama was only 25 years old, he outlined a programme designed to introduce the exiles to the practice of democratic self-rule but without losing touch with their own traditions. He made the announcement in February 1960 in Bodh Gaya (Bihar), where Lord Buddha attained enlightenment, thus emphasising the historic, cultural and religious links between Tibet and India. The process he initiated laid the foundations of democratic rule – the freely-elected assembly, the Tibetan Parliament-in-exile – that governs the community-in-exile and provides a model for their homeland.

At Bodh Gaya, the Dalai Lama advised his people to elect their representatives on the following basis: three each from each of the three Tibetan cholkas (provincial regions) of Dhotoe, Dhomey and U-Tsang; and one each from the four Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions. Since the exiles from each cholka were widely dispersed, the electoral process would be complicated, but election would serve to remind them to retain their sense of identity and belonging. Thus the first elected representative body in Tibet's history – designated as the Commission of Tibetan People's Deputies (CTPD) took oath on September 2, 1960. Since then, this day has been observed as Democracy Day by the community-in-exile.