

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #23D – Sonam (alias)  
May 16, 2012

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #23D
2. Interviewee: Sonam (alias)
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1934
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Kongpo
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: May 16, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Tibet, Mcleod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 44 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Thupten Kelsang Dakpa
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Sonam was born into a large family with 11 siblings. He describes being a *samadok* ‘farmer and herder,’ cultivating lands in springtime and going up the mountains with the animals during the summer months. He recalls herding animals since the age of 7 or 8 and he knows the whole process of milking and preparing cheese and butter. He gives a detailed account of the many wild animals that were present in the mountains and also describes a rarely seen animal, the *migoe* ‘ape/gorilla/yeti.’

Sonam’s father died when he was young and he became a servant to other families because his mother had a difficult time supporting all the children. He was 14 years old when the Chinese appeared in Tibet and he noticed they looked very poor. They requested food, clothing and animals to transport their weapons.

Sonam became a monk at Gaden Monastery but stayed only two years until the uprising took place in 1959. The monks tried to defend themselves but were overpowered and fled. He joined the resistance group, fighting the Chinese for two months at Tsethang in Lhoka. After coming into exile in India, Sonam joined the Establishment 22 unit of the Indian Army and served it for 22 years. He narrates various experiences, including fighting in Bangladesh war in 1971. He also served as headman of the Ngapa Division in Dharamsala for 16 years.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Childhood memories, environment/wildlife, farm life, herding, first appearance of Chinese, resistance fighters, life as a refugee in India.

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## **Interview #23D**

**Interviewee: Sonam [alias]**

**Age: 78, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Rebecca Novick**

**Interview Date: May 16, 2012**

Question: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world.

**Interviewee#23D: [Nods]**

Q: Your personal memories are going to help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

**#23D: Okay.**

Q: Do you give the Tibet Oral History Project permission to use this interview?

00:01:02

**#23D: How?**

Q: Do [you] give permission to [use] this interview?

**#23D: Permission?**

Q: Yes, permission.

**#23D: [I] give permission.**

Q: Thank you very much.

**#23D: Okay.**

Q: During the interview if you want to take a break to go to the bathroom or take a rest, you can just let us know, okay?

**#23D: Okay, thank you.**

Q: If there's any question that you would rather not answer, that's fine. You don't have to answer everything.

**#23D: Okay.**

Q: *Pa-la* ‘respectful term for father,’ I have to ask you, if this interview was shown in Tibet or China or anywhere else, would it create a problem for you?

**#23D: It is not possible to say. [You] mean if the picture is shown in China; if it comes to the knowledge of China?**

Q: Yes.

00:02:03

**#23D: I do not have any interaction with China.**

Q: Do you have family members in Tibet?

**#23D: In Tibet?**

Q: Yes.

**#23D: [I] have relatives though the older generation has passed away. There are younger relatives.**

Q: *Pa-la*, can you just tell us a little bit about your family life, your very early family life growing up?

**#23D: When I was young and growing up in Tibet, my village was in Kongpo. It came under the district called Nyatsazong. [People] in my village were *samadok* ‘farmers and herders.’**

Q: Yes?

**#23D: *Samadok*.**

Q: What’s *samadok*?

**#23D: During summer one went up [the mountains] as nomads and cultivated lands in the spring and autumn. That is how [we] moved during summer and winter seasons.**

Q: Okay, so farmer and nomad both. I see.

**#23D: Right.**

Q: During winter [you] were a farmer...

00:03:56

**#23D: During winter and autumn, and spring [we] did farming and in the summer went to the nomadic sites in the valley with *dri* ‘female yak’ and yaks.**

Q: As a child which did you prefer, the summertime or the wintertime?

**#23D: [We] changed places during summer and winter. During summer [we] went to the nomadic sites where the weather was pleasant, and there were grass, flowers and different kinds of wild animals. There were waterfalls in the grassy hills. The places the nomads went were extremely pleasant. As for me, I [started to] work as a nomad at the age of 7 or 8. I have knowledge about the work of a nomad, how a nomad herd animals, how milking is done and how butter and cheese are made. I have all the experience of working as a nomad for around...**

Q: Did you start at the age of 7 or 8?

**#23D: [I] started working as a nomad around 7. [I] have full knowledge about the nomads' work, as [I] have experienced it. And then during springtime [we] cultivated lands for three months.**

Q: Did [you] cultivate lands for three months?

00:06:10

**#23D: Right, in springtime.**

Q: Spring?

**#23D: [We] cultivated lands in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tibetan lunar months. In autumn I harvested the crops.**

Q: What did [you] sow in your fields?

**#23D: Grain [barley], wheat, peas and mustard were sown.**

Q: What was the kind of relationship between the nomads and the yaks?

**#23D: Nomads and yaks?**

Q: Yes, nomads and yaks.

**#23D: It is like this with the nomads and the yaks. Yaks are the focal point of the nomads. One must say yaks and *dri*.**

Q: Yak and *dri* obviously, I mean.

**#23D: Yak is like the bullock and *dri* is the cow. So, the names are *dri* and yak. Nomads herd both these together. When the nomads went to the nearby mountains, things were loaded on the yaks. [They] moved from place to place. The *dri* were for milking. Milk came from the *dri*. Butter, cheese, all these came from the *dri*.**

Q: Were yaks beneficial for fieldwork?

00:08:50

**#23D: Yaks were used to plough the fields.**

Q: Are they like easy animals to train or were they bit stubborn? What's their character like?

**#23D: Yaks?**

Q: Yes, the yaks. Were [they] easy to herd or...

**#23D: Yaks were grand to look at. There were very big yaks with bodies as big as this [raises right hand] and horns that were wide [raises both hands 3 feet apart]. Some big yaks were so much [holds right hand above head level]. The [length] of their bodies was from here to here [gestures off camera]. There were big yaks.**

Q: What was the yaks' character like?

**#23D: Yaks were big built and powerful. For instance, if we were to test strength, we would not be in a position to challenge a yak. Even if two or three people held a yak, the yak would win. [They] were very strong.**

Q: When herding yaks, what were they like?

00:10:36

**#23D: In my region for instance, yaks and its kind were not brought home during winter, but left on the top of mountains where there was grass.**

Q: Were [they] let loose?

**#23D: [They] were let loose during the winter. At the time of sowing the fields in our village in summer, the yaks were brought down and they were used to plow the fields. Each man with a pair of yaks made furrows in the fields. The fields were plowed and then sown.**

Q: You mentioned earlier that fields were sowed in winter.

**#23D: Sowing was not done in winter. Sowing was not done in winter. Fields were sown in the spring, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tibetan lunar month. For instance, around this time [May] in Tibet the fields would have been sown and the crops this big [raises right hand 3 feet above ground], it being the 3<sup>rd</sup> month. In the 4<sup>th</sup> month, [they] would be so much [4 feet above ground] and then the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> months, and harvesting took place in the 8<sup>th</sup> month. It was autumn time when the fields were harvested.**

Q: Was harvesting done in the 7<sup>th</sup> month?

00:12:12

**#23D: It was after the 7<sup>th</sup> month and harvesting was completed by the 8<sup>th</sup> month. Fields were sown and the crops reaped by then. Harvesting was completed in the 8<sup>th</sup> month.**

Q: Do you have anything more to say?

**#23D: No, nothing.**

Q: What other kinds of animals did you see in the mountains?

**#23D: There would be different animals in different regions. For example, the majority [of animals] in the region I lived were *dri* and yaks. The nomads accompanied the *dri* and yaks for the duration of three months in summer, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> months. [The nomads] were with the *dri* and yaks. The *dri* were milked in the morning and then the *dri* and the yaks were taken to the mountains, mountains where there was good grass.**

Q: Weren't there other animals like wolves and such?

00:14:41

**#23D: There were *dri* and yaks in my village. In some places, there were cows.**

Q: Were there cows?

**#23D: There were no cows and oxen in our place, but [they] were found in various other regions of Kongpo. And in some areas were goats and sheep. Shepherds grazed the goats and sheep. In some...**

Q: Were there any wild animals besides the nomads' animals?

**#23D: There were different kinds of wild animals besides the nomads' animals.**

Q: Like what?

**#23D: The most famous wild animal was the tiger and then there was the leopard.**

Q: Were there tigers?

00:15:34

**#23D: There were tigers.**

Q: Were there leopards?

**#23D: There were leopards. Then there were bears and Tibetan brown bears. There were wolves and wild dogs that devoured *dri* and yaks. The wild animals also killed horses and mules. [Wild animals] were found in the forests and among the rocks in the grassy mountains. Wild animals were found everywhere in plenty.**

Q: Was there hunting?

**#23D: What?**

Q: Was there hunting?

**#23D:** There were different kinds of wild animals that lived in the mountains, like deer, likewise one called blue sheep that had huge antlers; similarly, there was the *lhagay*. There were different kinds of wild animals like foxes and...[not discernible] on the mountains. [They] were more in number during the summer season and fewer in winter. There were different kinds of wild animals but these did not harm the *dri* and yaks. They just roamed in the grassy mountains.

Q: What was considered like a very rare wild animal to see?

00:18:31

**#23D:** There were many animals in the mountains that were rare to find. However, I have seen most of them. Animals that were said to be present but never seen were the *ragoe* ‘wild goats.’ There were the *ragoe*, *phagoe* ‘wild pig’ and *migoe* ‘ape/gorilla/yeti.’ Such were present. [Laughs]

Q: Was there really *migoe*?

**#23D:** Yes. I have not seen but heard of them.

Q: Was the *ragoe* half goat and half man?

**#23D:** *Migoe* are those that live in the forests.

Q: Have you heard [of them]?

**#23D:** [I] have heard. There really were *migoe*. They lived only in the forests and not in the grassy mountains or rocky mountains. They had the souls of humans, were bigger than humans and walked on [their] feet like humans. [They] had four limbs like humans and could walk on [their] feet. [Their] body had hair like animals. A *migoe*’s face was like [human]. They were very famous.

For instance, if we sowed the fields today, they could see the work of sowing and plowing during the day. They watched from the forests what people did.

Q: Why did [they] watch?

00:20:39

**#23D:** After people stopped work in the evening and went to their respective homes, they [*migoe*] came and [undid] everything that the people had done. [Laughs] It was the same when the crops were reaped. The crops would have grown well and the harvesting could not be accomplished within a day. The *migoe* watched how people reaped during the day [laughs] and when work was stopped for the day in the evening, the *migoe* [thought], “That is the way they harvest crops. We must also harvest the crops. [We] will do the same.” All [of them] came down into the fields. They did not have [tools] to harvest like humans. They ruined the fields, [I] swear. [Laughs]

Q: The yeti would come and sort of work the harvest?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Tried to work but he's not good at it. So he would ruin everything.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you ever see this yourself?

**#23D: A *migoe*?**

Q: Have you seen crops ruined by the *migoe*?

**#23D: I once saw a ruined field but have not seen a *migoe*. People of our village say that they had seen numerous *migoe*.**

Q: Was the field ruined?

00:23:39

**#23D: There was nothing left in the field to harvest.**

Q: Everyone believes the yeti exists? It's not like a legend or a story, something...?

**#23D: There are *migoe*.**

Q: It isn't like a story?

**#23D: What?**

Q: It isn't like a story?

**#23D: No, no.**

Q: One really believes it?

**#23D: It is for certain that the *migoe* exists. What I had heard, I saw it done [ruined fields]. It is said that it exists but I did not see it. The reason I did not see it was because I was not old enough then. I was around 14 or 15 years old. Around that time all the people of the area said, "The *migoe* has destroyed. The *migoe* has come and ruined all the fields." They had souls like humans and watched people work during daytime. They did not dare come where the people were working. After work stopped in the evening, people went back and the fields were left unattended. They came down from the forests and imitated the humans. Then they destroyed everything.**

Q: What color is it?

**#23D: What?**

Q: What did [you] hear was the color of the *migoe*'s fur?

**#23D: [I] heard it was black.**

Q: Black?

**#23D: [I] heard its fur was black and around here [touches stomach area] it was reddish. The elders told me that. Its face was the face of a human, including the hair on head. [I] heard the head was big.**

Q: The head was big.

00:26:36

**#23D: Yes. There were different sizes, it was said.**

Q: Did you ever see footprints of this animal?

**#23D: [I] cannot say for sure if [I] saw footprints. They lived in the deep forests. If one came across them on the way, they ate humans. [People] dared not enter the forests.**

Q: So people were little bit afraid it seems of this creature. There was fear as well.

**#23D: Yes?**

Q: Were [people] afraid of the *migoe*?

**#23D: The *migoe*?**

Q: Was there fear?

**#23D: Fear the *migoe*?**

Q: Did [they] fear the *migoe*?

**#23D: The *migoe* was afraid. They fled when people arrived, [I] heard. [They] fled into the forests.**

Q: Were people afraid of the *migoe*?

00:28:02

**#23D: [They] were afraid. Nobody dared confront the *migoe*. If they [*migoe*] got a chance, [they] would certainly devour everyone whether humans or animals. People did not dare challenge them. Horses, cows, dogs...horses and cows are of big build but the *migoe* carried them off on [their] shoulders.**

Q: [They] were strong.

**#23D: Yes, very strong.**

Q: When it came to having to kill the yaks for meat, how did that happen? How did you do that?

**#23D: Yes?**

Q: Did [you] kill yaks for meat?

**#23D: Meat?**

Q: Yes.

**#23D: [We] ate a lot of meat.**

Q: Were yaks killed?

**#23D: Yaks were killed.**

Q: [Yaks] were killed.

**#23D: Yes.**

Q: How was that done?

**#23D: [Speaks before question is interpreted] There would be different nomadic families. Yaks were not killed during summertime when they went to the nomadic sites. [They] were not killed in summer because that was the time the *dri* and yaks fattened up. The *dri* and yaks became weak during spring because of the cold weather and scarcity of grass. All the *dri* and yaks became weak. Then the weather became warmer after spring and the animals gained weight. Then the *dri* and yaks shed their annual hair. *Dri*, yaks and any animal for that matter shed fur; new fur replaced the old.**

Q: [They] shed fur?

**#23D: The fur was replaced. Last year's fur was replaced by new ones.**

Q: Did [they] change coat in winter?

00:30:58

**#23D: Yes, and maintained the same coat for the summer and winter. It was the same fur for the year. And when spring began, the fur changed. Then the nomads took the *dri* and yaks during summer, in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> months, to the pastures where the *dri* and yaks grew fat. They became healthy. And then the nomads returned in winter to where the farmers lived. Then in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> month, some families slaughtered a *dri* or a yak. The *dri* and yaks were killed at the time when [they] were at their fattest.**

Q: Were older *dri* and yaks killed?

**#23D: The age...it depended upon the number of family members. There were some that did not kill. Some never slaughtered. There were some that faced difficulties in subsistence and slaughtered and consumed [their animals].**

Q: When you did decide to kill a yak, how did you do that? What was the method used?

**#23D: Family members did not do the slaughtering. There were people that engaged in killing and they were called. So, whether it was a *dri* or a yak, they closed the snout and killed it. The *dri* or yak's snout was bound and it was killed. There were people that did the slaughtering.**

Q: Were the necks cut or how was it done?

00:34:15

**#23D: The necks were not cut. The snout of the *dri* and yak were long that was bound with a rope and suffocated.**

Q: When you were a kid growing up, what kind of stories did you hear? Did your father or grandparents tell you stories growing up?

**#23D: When I was growing up? Basically my family was a poor one. [We] were poor and there were many relatives and children at home. [We] led a poor life.**

Q: Were there many children?

**#23D: There were many children.**

Q: How many?

**#23D: My mother gave birth to 11 children.**

Q: How many boys and girls?

**#23D: [Tries to recall] There were six girls and four boys. One boy passed away when [he] was small. In all there were 11 children in my home.**

Q: What kind of stories did mother relate?

00:36:30

**#23D: Mother lived longer while father passed away when he was young. [He] expired at the age of 49.**

Q: 48?

**#23D: Forty-nine. [I] wonder if the Chinese had appeared in Tibet then. Father passed away at the age of 49. The Chinese had not arrived in Tibet at that time. [I] cannot say for certain if the Chinese had not arrived in Tibet. There were five sons and six daughters**

from the same set of parents. Hence, there were many children in the family and [we] faced a lot of difficulties. [We] were not able to cultivate a large tract of land and there were not many *dri* and yaks. Besides revenue from the animals and fields, there was not any other source of income for many families.

Then from the age of 7 or 8, I did not stay home much. I went to serve as a servant to other families for a year or five months or so. [I] went to work for many families to earn a living, working as a nomad and on the farms. [I] did not stay home much from the age of 8. From a small age [I] grew up as a servant. And then around the age of 14, I was quite grown up. I was 14 years old in the year the Chinese appeared in Tibet.

Q: Fourteen?

**#23D: Yes, 14, [I] was 14 in the year '50. When the Chinese appeared in Tibet I was young and wondered, "What is a Chinese like? What is it? How strange?" The elders of the village and neighbors including my parents remarked, "It is being said that the Chinese are coming to Tibet. The Chinese are coming to Tibet. Alas, now there will be no happiness." All the older people lamented among themselves. [I] had no knowledge what were the Chinese and what was coming. Then when I became 15 years old...when I was exactly 15, the Chinese were in Tibet in the year '50. The Chinese were in every region of Tibet's territory.**

00:40:06

Once [they] were in every part of Tibet's territory, people in the eastern part of Tibet struggled together to resist them. However, they were unsuccessful and the Chinese invaded Tibet. Then from '50 to '59, the Chinese and Tibetans lived side by side in Tibet. Whatever the Chinese wanted was appeased. Whatever the Chinese wanted from Tibet, be it environment resources, economic assistance, everything was given to their full satisfaction. It was not just 100 or 200 Chinese but there were many thousands and tens of thousands of Chinese. Thus [they] lived in Tibet and were supported.

[Interpreter to interviewee]: Could you please wait. Let [me] translate.

[Interviewee to interpreter]: Okay.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Did he say how his dad died?

Q: How did father die?

**#23D: Father's passing away?**

Q: Yes.

**#23D: Father passed away at the age of 49.**

Q: How did [he] pass away? From illness?

**#23D:** [Father] suffered from back pain. [He] fell ill during summer and passed away in winter. I cannot recall but was told that he was 49 years old then. [He] passed away around that age.

Q: What did you see, *pa-la*? Carry on please with what you saw?

00:44:21

**#23D:** When the Chinese initially arrived in Tibet, the older people of our region spoke with sadness, sorrow and shock, “The Chinese are entering Tibet. Once in Tibet, [they] will make it impossible [or us] to remain in Tibet and there will be no happiness. There is great danger.” The elders said such things. However, for the likes of us it was strange and [we] could not fathom what the Chinese were like.

Subsequently in the year '50 when the Chinese arrived in various regions of Tibet, [I] saw the Chinese. At the time [I] saw the Chinese, they looked famished as if China could not feed its huge population. They were dressed in army uniform and carried guns and bombs. Except for that, they were incredibly poor where it concerned food and clothing. Thousands of them came staggering into Tibet. What happened when [they] arrived in Tibetan territory? They were commanding and ordered [the people] to bring them food, clothes and likewise horses, mules, donkeys and yaks to transport things. [They] made the horses and mules transport their weapons. [They] did like that.

Since entering Tibet in 1950 and until '59, [the Chinese] lived alongside the Tibetans who helped them in whatever way they could. Then the Chinese became powerful. They told the government and people to lend assistance and whatever resources the country of Tibet and people had, except for things that families did not own, every kind of help was given. So for nine years Chinese and Tibetans lived like friends. Then in the year '59, they organized a fresh army in Tibet to suppress the Tibetans and took over Lhasa in the year '59 leading to the death of many thousands of people. That happened in the year '59. I was around 22 years old then. I was a monk of Gaden Monastery for two years.

Q: Oh, you were at Gaden! Okay, so you are a monk in Gaden and you were there in March 1959. Can you tell us what happened?

00:50:27

**#23D:** I was not long at Gaden. [I] was in Gaden for only two years because [I] did not get time since the Chinese attacked. There is the Monlam Chenmo ‘Great Prayer Festival’ that took place in Lhasa every year. [I] attended the Monlam for two years. The following year, just after the Monlam concluded there was unrest in Lhasa. It was in the year '59. How did the unrest occur? In actual the Chinese and Tibetans were not cordial. There were skirmishes everywhere, in Kham, in Amdo and in Utsang. However, one sort of lived in harmony and then what happened in the year '59?

1959 was the year the Chinese wanted to capture His Holiness the Dalai Lama. [They] said that [His Holiness] would be invited to the Chinese prison called Silonpa in the year '59 and that was the cause of the unrest. Had His Holiness been escorted to Silonpa... “Silonpa is the Chinese army’s prison. [His Holiness] cannot be escorted there,” all the Tibetan

people and, likewise, the [Tibetan] army stopped it. [They] did not let the Chinese escort His Holiness. The people stopped it. That angered the Chinese and [they said], “It cannot be stopped. [We] will invite [His Holiness].” And prepared for war everywhere and attacked Lhasa. His Holiness was not allowed to go there. Had he left, [nobody] knows what would have happened to His Holiness.

Q: Right. [They] might try to kill [him].

**#23D: Yes, [they] would try to kill. All the people lay on the motor roads to stop the vehicles. All the [Tibetan] soldiers stood in line by the roads. However, the Chinese were powerful and demanded [His Holiness] be allowed to leave.**

00:53:26

**Yes, the Sumchue Dhueden ‘March 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary’ originated on that day. It was on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March that [the Chinese] said His Holiness would be invited to Silonpa, which the people stopped. The Women’s Uprising took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March. The Chinese killed very many famous women among them. The women arose saying, “Tibet is independent. Chinese cannot stay in Tibet” and that they were bad. There were two uprisings. During the time of the women’s uprising, it consisted only of women from Lhasa and the surrounding areas.**

Q: *Pa-la*, what were you doing at this time?

[Interpreter interprets as]: Where were you during the Mangtsoe Dhueden ‘Republic Day’?

**#23D: During the Mangtsoe Dhueden?**

Q: Yes.

**#23D: During the Mangtsoe Dhueden, I was...The Sumchue Dhueden took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March.**

Q: Where were you then during the Sumchoe Dhueden?

**#23D: I was in Gaden then. There was a talk that Gaden Monastery was to be attacked. There was great danger and so I was sent on guard duty.**

Q: Where did you go to fight?

00:56:08

**#23D: To guard the monastery.**

Q: Did [you] have guns?

**#23D: It was in the year ’59. There were guns and swords.**

Q: Did you have a gun?

**#23D: A hundred monks from Gaden were sent to get guns in Lhasa. One hundred monks. When it was said that there would be war and that there was the danger of losing Lhasa, a hundred monks of Gaden left for Lhasa. They went to fetch guns, bombs and weaponry. There is a bridge just before reaching Lhasa. [I] do not know if you [interpreter] know of it but there is a bridge called Kuru Bridge. The monks encountered the Chinese on this [bridge]. The armed Chinese troops stopped the monks and threatened to kill them all. However, the monks did not heed them and rushed to Lhasa to get guns. The armory was located in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. [They] located all the rooms, which were locked and were unable to get the keys. So [they] broke the locks and the hundred monks received guns, bombs, cannons and a large amount of bullets. The monks of Gaden were able to get that.**

00:58:08

**And then it was heard that Lhasa was lost and that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left. “[Monks of] Gaden do not fight. It cannot be. [Monks of] Sera, it is not possible to fight. Except for monks, monasteries and people being wiped out, there is nothing but loss. It is better to seek peace and leave [war],” such advice was given. Heeding such [advice], I left Gaden on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March. I brought the weapons. We were 80 monks that managed to leave in the night. It was told that [we] should not remain at Gaden. Heeding that news [I] left through Lhoka.**

**[I] fought the Chinese for two whole months at Tsethang in Lhoka.**

Q: Where?

**#23D: Lhoka Tsethang.**

Q: Lhoka Tsethang?

**#23D: Yes.**

Q: [You] fought for around two months?

**#23D: [I] fought for two months. There was a mixture of soldiers then. There were soldiers of the Tibetan Government army, the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] and monks from the three great monasteries [Sera, Drepung and Gaden]. The mixed group fought for two months at Tsethang. Though we fought greatly, the battle at Tsethang could not be continued. We lost all our valiant, strong and famous men at Tsethang. [We] struggled hard to conquer the main Chinese army at Tsethang, but in the morning many tens of thousands of Chinese appeared. Hence, there was no [chance] and [we] went to the place called Tsona.**

Q: Tsugna?

01:00:36

**#23D:** Tsona. When [we] reached Tsona, the Chinese had arrived there taking another route. The Chinese were attacking us. [We] faced another encounter at Tsona. There was no end to the Chinese and their number kept increasing. And later—I cannot recall the dates—I came to seek asylum in India through Mon Tawang [Arunachal Pradesh]. It was in the year '59. [I] came to Mon Tawang. After reaching Mon Tawang up until now I have been in India for—how many years is it—around 53 years.

Q: Around 54 years.

**#23D:** I have lived in India for around that many years. However, one cannot sit idle on reaching India. [I] have struggled greatly for the cause of Tibet. There have been talks and contacts between governments and the Indian Government has lent great assistance. We had great hopes as well. “It is useless to stay like this. [We] must once again challenge them [the Chinese].” All the Tibetans in India were given various privileges by the government. Some left for the Settlements, some build monasteries, some attended schools, some worked in factories and some traded. When [I] could not join any of these, [I] finally went to...

01:04:34

Q: *Pa-la*, you knew how to use a gun very well, yes? You knew already how to use a gun?

**#23D:** Gun?

Q: Yes.

**#23D:** In order to use a gun, when a time came that it concerned your life...There were many that could fire a gun. There were many colleagues and one learned to use a gun easily, whatever gun it might be. There were many types of guns.

Q: The short-barrel ones?

**#23D:** The English made short-barrel ones were there but that was not a great one. [Laughs]

[Interviewer to interpreter]: But did he already know or...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He picked up.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He didn't know? I thought he would know from being a nomad.

Q: Please continue.

**#23D:** Shall I speak?

Q: Yes.

**#23D: Then I was in the country of India. The Government of India and His Holiness the Dalai Lama discussed the situation of the Tibetan refugees in India but could not talk about those in Tibet. Initially, [I] reached the place called Missamari [Assam]. His Holiness requested the Indian Government to help the Tibetan refugees. The Government of India accepted and made plans for all the refugees that had arrived. Those in the monasteries were given time to attend prayer assemblies.**

**There were mostly young adults at that time but not many small ones. Schools were started. Settlements were established for the people. All these happened because of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and India's Prime Minister Pandit Nehru. Thanks to that, Tibetans are everywhere in India and have formed organizations. All these are thanks to the Government of India. That is for one.**

01:08:35

**Secondly, in my case [laughs] I could not join many of the organizations. The reason being that I was in another program. An army unit called Establishment 22 was started. The Establishment 22 still exists. I was among the first that joined it. [I] committed myself. If such an army was formed that could provide the chance to fight the Chinese once again, each one rushed to volunteer saying, "I want to join." The unit was begun and we were among the first. I served the unit for 22 years until my time came to an end.**

**[I] endured great hardships while in the army. [I] took part in the Bangladesh war. Tibetans won the Bangladesh war. [I] took part in the Bangladesh war and then was posted to the snow covered mountain tops on the border between Pakistan and India. Had I been a person with rights, it would have been impossible to endure it even for a day. There was a lot of hardship. However, hoping that something would come about for the cause of Tibet, [I] did not care about death or struggle but hoped that one could confront them [the Chinese] at the earliest. The only thought was to confront them, as [we] did not have anyone else to challenge. So for 22 years I served in the army and took part in the Bangladesh war. Likewise, [I] have experience in fighting on land, sea and air. [I] trained in all. For instance, I jumped from planes—it is called "jump" in English.**

Q: That's right.

**#23D: [I] jumped 34 times.**

Q: Thirty?

**#23D: Thirty-four.**

Q: Thirty-eight?

**#23D: Thirty-four.**

Q: Thirty-four.

01:11:03

**#23D: [I] jumped 34 times. [I] joined the Bangladesh war and was there for two years. Finally we were the victors, the Tibetans. The Tibetan army won. That is one of the reasons the Indian Government hold us in high esteem and trust us greatly. [We] were close to the border between Bangladesh and Burma. Here is Burma and here is Bangladesh. We soldiers went into Burmese territory to take a look. Burma is a beautiful place. There were huge houses in Burma and Bangladesh.**

Well, so in this way I did whatever [I] could in the army for the cause of Tibet. [I] left after [my] time in the army [ended]. I married before the end of [my] term in the army. [I] took a wife and was no longer a monk. [I] married and had six children.

Q: Four children?

**#23D: Six.**

Q: Six?

**#23D: From the six, two passed away and four survived. However, perhaps it is my destiny that misfortune occurred for [my] wife and children did not remain [with me]. I greatly hoped [we] could live together but [they] did not. The mother and children had different opinions and we are no longer together. [We] were not together. I am alone. I am very poor and have nothing.**

01:13:20

**So [I] fought in the Bangladesh war and then returned. And then got married. The marriage did not go well. There were many children and the home broke up. Then I served as the headman of the people here in this region for 16 years. [I] was the headman for 16 years and there was a change last year. [I] was the headman from '95 until last year in this region. There are different divisions here like Kapa, Gapa, Ngapa, Chapa and I was the leader of the Ngapa division. [I] was the headman of the Ngapa division for 16 years. It ended last year. There is no salary but a sum of 700 Indian *rupees* per month from the government. That was it. However, I have served my time.**

Q: What's the work like?

**#23D: What?**

Q: What are the responsibilities?

**#23D: Of the headman?**

Q: Yes.

**#23D: There are many responsibilities for the headman. Presently the workload has reduced. There are not many that come with problems. Problems have reduced to a great extent. Initially there was so much to handle. People faced great problems.**

Q: Which region? [You] were the headman of which region?

**#23D: Me?**

Q: Yes.

01:15:12

**#23D: [Points right] Up there just beyond the road. That is the Ngapa division. Here [points to left] is the Gapa division. The Chapa division is at the Phosa Bazaar. The Ngapa and two divisions are located near the road and around Tsuglakhang. There are five divisions. So [I] served in that way and now that I am old, I requested to be excused. Otherwise, I was not being let off easily saying that I must continue to serve. [I] served for around 16 years.**

Q: How many years did you work?

**#23D: Sixteen years.**

Q: [You] worked for 16 years for the Tibetan Government?

**#23D: Yes, the Tibetan Government—22 years in the army and headman for 16 years. Well, [my] life has been spent that way. Presently I have no home and nothing. I only have a place to sleep at night and no buildings. [I] have a tin sheet place that hardly prevents leakage. This is not a grievance but my story. [I] have struggled in that way. [I] have no shop, likewise, no restaurant, likewise, no place outside to sell stuff, let alone a motorcycle or a vehicle. [I] do not even own a mobile phone.**

Q: Don't you have entitlements as an employee of the Tibetan Government?

**#23D: Once the tenure is over, there is nothing from the Tibetan Government. You carried out what your responsibilities were. There is nothing like, "You have done a lot of work. These are your entitlements." Each person has a responsibility and you perform it. There is no one to petition. That is a problem.**

[Interpreter to interviewee]: I'll interpret.

**[Interviewee to interpreter]: It is not necessary to interpret it.**

[Interpreter to interviewee]: I'll interpret the earlier portion.

Q: *Pa-la*, I've a couple of questions back in Tibet. One is where did you learn to write?

**#23D: Yes?**

Q: Where did you learn to write Tibetan?

**#23D: Tibetan script?**

Q: Yes.

01:20:22

**#23D: I have not been to a school even for a day to [learn] Tibetan writing. For instance, in the olden days in Tibet, children in the families were taught to read the alphabet. Initially one learned to read the alphabet and then to write. I observed how the characters were written and also asked those that knew how to write the different characters. There were students that studied from a learned man and one went along there to read the alphabet. The next day one went somewhere else where children were being taught and sat with them. When I sat there, the children came along. I requested [of them] to write [me] the alphabet and they did so. There were teachers that were monks. They were monks of the monastery. By observing such, I learned to write Tibetan characters somewhat illegibly. However, [I] am fluent in reading, be it any of the prayer scriptures. [Laughs]**

Q: When you went to fight as a monk from Gaden Monastery, did you give up your vows in a formal way to somebody or was it more like just in your mind?

**#23D: [I] was still a monk then. How I initially became a monk of Gaden—it was in my village. Actually there were around four monasteries in the village, in one part of the village. At the end of my village was a very holy monastery located near a snow-covered rocky mountain. The name of the monastery was Dakar Lhachung.**

Q: Dakar Lhachung?

01:23:51

**#23D: Yes. There was another monastery in the lower part of the village located on a crossroad called Bumchung Karmo, Bumchung Karmo. These two monasteries were one but two divisions. The monastery atop the rocky mountain called Dakar Lhachung was established by the Karmapa Chodak Gyatso, the 7<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. Gyalsay Shiwalha formed the one located in the lower part—Gyalsay Shiwalha.**

**Though the two monasteries were located in two different points, prayer assemblies were held together. The bigger prayer assemblies [were held together] while the smaller ones were held in the respective monasteries. This was the practice every year. The older monks told me that I should become a monk at Bumchung Karmo.**

Q: Your fighting in the war is against Buddha dharma. So didn't one have to leave monkhood?

**#23D: [I] had not left monkhood then.**

Q: When did you leave monkhood?

**#23D: [I] left monkhood when I arrived in India.**

Q: Did [you] leave monkhood only then?

**#23D:** Yes.

Q: Hadn't [you] left monkhood until then?

**#23D:** What?

Q: I see. Didn't you have to do something?

**#23D:** [I] had not left monkhood until after coming to India. After coming to India, [I] had to join the army...

Q: Were you still in monk's robes while firing?

01:25:48

**#23D:** When it came to the point of war, the monks' robes were removed. [We] removed the robes in our quarters and carried weapons. Guns could be seen everywhere in the monastery. Nobody wore monks' robes. [I] told you earlier that I was a monk of Bumchung Karmo. That was when I was small and had not joined Gaden. The two divisions used to gather together.

Dakar Lhachung was founded by the 7<sup>th</sup> Karmapa and the monastery was very holy. It was a pilgrim site of the Guru Rinpoche. Then there was a very holy lama called Karma Choying Wooser. Likewise, there was a [waterfall] called Tsechu Nyintzen Dhueduk. It was a waterfall from a rock. It fell three times a day and then the water stopped. It fell and then stopped. There was such a waterfall. Then there was a pilgrim site of Guru Rinpoche. It was up in the rocky mountain. Hence, everyone considered the monastery Dakar Lhachung as very holy.

The one called Bumchung Karmo located in the lower part of the village and Dakar Lhachung were the same monastery. What is the situation now? Dakar Lhachung Monastery was destroyed earlier, but the Chinese Government has given it permission and restored it lately, while there is not a trace of the Bumchung Karmo Monastery. This monastery was totally wiped out and there is nothing left of it.

Q: In my opinion when monks went to war, they decide not to remain monks, isn't it?

**#23D:** The monks?

Q: For instance, when one goes to war, [he says] "I cannot remain a monk." The monks approach the *rinpoche* and...

01:28:22

**#23D:** When going to war, due to time constraint...It is a matter of time and though you wish to remain a monk and attend prayer assemblies, when the situation arises that makes you suffer, when the situation is grave, you do not think of remaining a monk. [Laughs]

**You leave everything and either go to war or escape if you can. After the escape, it is difficult to say that you wish to remain a monk because of the changes in situations.**

**There were numerous monks of the three great monasteries and other monasteries. After coming to India, it was requested of the Indian Government to [provide a place] where the monks could continue their studies and practice. There were monks that could flee during the uprising. Once you leave the monastery, you leave it for good.**

**The Indian Government provided a place at Buxar [West Bengal]. It is called Buxar Choling or Bagar Choling. Prime Minister Nehru had told His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “You can start a monastery here where around a hundred monks can live together and do their studies and practice.” “A hundred monks is too small a number. Please allow for a larger number,” His Holiness replied. Hence Prime Minister Nehru allowed for 1,500 monks. Subsequently the monasteries of Sera, Gaden and Drepung, and many others were established. There is no [monastery] in Buxar now. All...**

Q: Bagso?

01:31:04

**#23D: It is called Buxar Choga or something. It is thanks to Pandit Nehru and His Holiness that the great monasteries of Sera, Gaden and Drepung were re-established and other monasteries like Sakya, Kagyu, etc. That is how they were formed. Initially when coming from Tibet, everyone was like a layman with no monasteries.**

Q: Did you have any kind of protective amulet in Tibet that was given to you?

**#23D: What?**

Q: Did you have a special amulet when you went to fight? Did [you] have an amulet?

**#23D: [I] had a special amulet that was the *tsondung* ‘protective amulet.’**

Q: *Tsondung*?

**#23D: One could request for a *tsondung*.**

Q: Who gave it [to you]?

**#23D: There were *tsondung* at the respective great monasteries.**

Q: Were [they] cords? What were [they] like?

**#23D: Various lamas gave them. These were blessed by the lamas and could be cords or idols or clothes that belonged to holy lamas. [They] could be in various forms and were achieved by performing a great amount of chanting. Such were granted. Not everyone can grant them, as they must have the power to protect your life. So they were granted by very high lamas or were available in the monasteries. There were also cords that were blessed by**

**protective deities then in Tibet. Here there is no one that grants them. There is not any after [our] coming to India.**

Q: I have one last question for you and this is got to do with your time in Establishment 22. When the Indian Government sent, the Indian army sent you to fight, sent the Tibetans from Establishment 22 to fight in these different areas, where did they put the Tibetans in the ranks of the troops?

01:35:19

**#23D: Tibetan soldiers?**

Q: Yes, Tibetan soldiers.

**#23D: On Indian soil?**

Q: What was their rank like in the Indian army?

**#23D: In the Indian army...**

Q: Were [they] considered superior or inferior?

**#23D: [They] have a certain amount of trust.**

Q: Yes?

**#23D: [You] mean how [they] placed trust? The Government of India placed a great deal of trust in the Tibetan soldiers.**

Q: As numerous people say, were the Tibetans sent ahead during action?

01:35:52

**#23D: It happened like this. For example, I was among the first when the Establishment 22 was formed. I was not in the army in the year '62. India and China went to war in 1962. India and China fought at Mon Tawang. India was like the loser then. Subsequently the Tibetan unit was established. The war with Bangladesh began in the year 1972. Earlier there had been many encounters with Bangladesh, but India could not overcome them. The Indian Government suffered loss. Bangladesh suffered loss. Hence it was said that it was necessary for our unit to join the war without which they would have lost to Bangladesh. India could not put up a challenge. So orders came for us to take part. It was nine or 10 years since the formation of Establishment 22. There were Tibetans as well as Indian leaders for our unit.**

Q: Were there Tibetan leaders?

**#23D: Yes, there were Tibetan leaders and Indian leaders as well. During the difficult period in Bangladesh, the Indian leader said that it was imperative to send the Tibetan soldiers because it was impossible to conquer Bangladesh. India had suffered a great loss.**

Numerous Indian troops had been killed. So the Indian leader reported it to the Indian Government and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Therefore, the Indian and Tibetan Government jointly considered the matter and issued their permission [for the Tibetan unit] to go to Bangladesh. Then the unit of Establishment 22 left for Bangladesh. It was in the year '72. Oh, it was in the year '71.

Q: Was the Establishment 22 formed in '71?

01:39:09

**#23D: [We] left in '71 and returned in '72. The war in Bangladesh took around two years. We were a little over 5,000 troops then. It used to be said that there were around 6,000. It took around two years. Our soldiers possessed good protective amulets. We had each been given a protective amulet that had been blessed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, [His Holiness'] tutor Ling Rinpoche and others.**

**When the attack took place in Bangladesh, it was not like any ordinary war. The Tibetan unit was able to show immense accomplishments, which was on account of the protective amulets. When the Tibetan soldiers advanced, it was not anything on the part of the Tibetan troops, but the spirits and protective deities that marched ahead of the soldiers and protected and shouted. [Laughs] The soldiers were given protective amulets that saved [us]. Because of this protection, there were not many injured. Only a few suffered injuries. There were around 6,000 soldiers and except for a few that were injured, the protective amulets saved [all] and [we] were able to return. Bangladesh was given total independence and it remains shining now. [Laughs]**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I don't know if he can answer the question that I was asking...if he was on the frontlines. Is there any way that you can see if he can just answer that quickly without any details?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: I think they obviously were in the frontlines.

[Interviewer]: Can you ask him? Just see how he responds to it? Just sort of "yes" or "no" kind of answer?

Q: Were the Tibetan soldiers forcefully sent ahead of the Indian soldiers? Was it like that or not?

**#23D: No, the Indian soldiers...**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Were there no Indian soldiers during the war? Were they the first people to go before the Indians?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The Indian army was already fighting there. So...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yeah, but I'm talking about when they were sent in. Were they just right on the front of the action?

Q: Were the Tibetan soldiers sent ahead? Did the Indian soldiers come later?

**#23D: No, no. The Indian army had fought them many times earlier.**

Q: That is right, but when the Tibetan army arrived, was the Indian army present or was it behind or what?

**#23D: The Tibetans and Indians fought separately during an attack. It is possible that they fought together too. [I] would not know about the capabilities of the soldiers. The Indians and the Tibetans did fight together. However, there was a little difference in strength. The Tibetans were stronger.**

01:44:14

**The Tibetans were stronger. At certain places when the Tibetan and Indian soldiers proceeded together, the Tibetans reached the place of attack while the Indians lagged behind. So some had to go to fetch the Indians. [Laughs]**

Q: Okay *pa-la*, thank you so much for sharing your story. It was really, really interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW