

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #39 – Gangtso
June 27, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #39
2. Interviewee: Gangtso
3. Age: 56
4. Date of Birth: 1951
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Dawa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 27, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Thekchenling Monastery, Old Camp No. 2,
Lugsung Samdupling Settlement,
Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 10 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Gangtso was born into a family of six sisters and her parents separated when she was very young. Her mother passed away when Gangtso was 8 years old and she and her younger sisters each went to live with an older, married sister. Her pleasant memories of those days are of the snow-capped mountains, the grasslands, the river and ice skating.

As a young child, Gangtso witnessed the Chinese beating Tibetans and forcing them to demolish the local monastery and burn the scriptures. Gangtso remembers, "I felt very sad when they destroyed the monastery. I had no parents and the monastery was being destroyed. I cried a lot."

On an impulse, she and one sister, while grazing their cattle, decided to flee to India. Without informing their elder siblings, they made an all day and all night journey over the border without food or water. Gangtso was only 11 years old during the escape.

After a month in a refugee camp, Gangtso and her sister were given a room in a house and some land to farm in Mundgod, India. Later Gangtso married and took a position as matron of the Tibetan Children's Village in Bylakuppe so that her three children could receive an education.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, life under Chinese rule, destruction of monastery, escape experience, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #39

Interviewee: Gangtso

Age: 56, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Martin Newman

Interview Date: June 27, 2007

Question: Please tell us your name.

Interviewee #39: Gangtso.

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

#39: Yes.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During the interview if you wish to take a break or stop the interview at any time, please let us know.

#39: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss an issue, please tell us.

#39: Okay.

Q: If this were shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#39: No.

Q: We are honored to record your story and appreciate your participation.

#39: [Smiles]

Q: I would like to start by asking what your life was like in Tibet before the Chinese invasion when you were a child.

#39: We were agriculturists and also kept animals.

Q: Where were you born?

#39: Dawa.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#39: There were two of us, everyone was left behind. When our monastery was destroyed and our parents died, we escaped. Tibet was lost, my sister and I escaped. We ran from where we were herding the sheep.

Q: What exactly did you do? Was it yaks or sheep?

#39: We milked the goat, sheep, *dri* 'female yak' and looked after the animals.

Q: Did you sell the milk or what did you do with the products of the animals?

#39: We used it for ourselves. When the Chinese came, there was no way to sell it, only to use it ourselves. Earlier as we were close to the Indian border, we used to sell milk, butter and cheese to the Indians. After the Chinese came, we used it ourselves.

Q: What were your parents like, your father and your mother?

#39: I was young. My mother died when I was about 8 years old. My parents had separated when I was very small. I don't know what he [father] was like. My mother died when the Chinese came and they destroyed the monastery. A year after her death we escaped to India.

Q: Your mother died when you were 8 years old?

#39: Yes.

Q: Who did you live with?

-#39: I lived with my older sister. There were three older sisters and three younger sisters, so each younger sister went to live with an older sister. They looked after us.

Q: And your sister was older than you?

#39: Yes.

Q: How much older?

#39: Maybe she was 40 or 50. The one immediately older to me was about 30.

Q: And it was just the two of you living together?

#39: No. My sister was married. Her husband was there.

Q: I see. Who had a husband?

#39: My sister.

Q: She was very young when she got married?

#39: No, she was not young. She was about 30.

Q: And she is 4 years older than you?

#39: Yes.

Q: When you think about that time in your life, are there any very special pleasant memories that stand out for you?

#39: I can remember the place. There were mountains, snow-capped mountains and grasslands. The river called Langchen Khabab [Sutlej River] flows in our place.

Q: Did you play along the river?

#39: I may have played.

Q: What kind of games did you like to play as a child?

#39: We used to skate on the ice.

Q: Were there any other games you liked to play?

#39: Just games.

Q: Did you live near a monastery?

#39: There was a monastery close by. But since we were nomads, we used to live in other places.

Q: Did you ever spend any time in the monastery?

#39: No.

Q: When did you notice that things in your life were starting to change?

#39: Within a year of coming, the Chinese destroyed our monastery and then we fled to India. I did not notice any developments.

Q: When did you first know that the Chinese were coming?

#39: I was 10.

Q: What did you learn when you were 10?

#39: I was too young to know anything. Then they destroyed the monastery and we were not allowed to practice our religion.

Q: What did you hear from people around you? Before the monastery was destroyed did the Chinese come and spend time in the area or did they come and destroy the monastery immediately?

#39: They came suddenly.

Q: Where were you when this happened?

#39: I was out with the cattle and the elders were at home.

Q: Before this happened, was everything...this happened suddenly. Were there any other signs before this happened that something was changing, like the shortage of food or something different in your village?

#39: No, nothing.

Q: So it was all of a sudden?

#39: Yes. I was living in my sister's home and the Chinese came suddenly.

Q: What did you see and hear?

#39: The Chinese said we were not allowed to practice religion and that the monastery must be destroyed. When we said this shouldn't be done, they were very forceful.

Q: Did you see the Chinese destroying the monastery? Did you hear the noise of them destroying?

#39: Yes, I saw them do it. They destroyed the monastery and burnt the texts. They burnt the monastery.

Q: You saw them burning prayer books?

#39: Yes.

Q: Did you see them...how were they treating the monks in the monastery?

#39: They were treating the monks very badly. They ordered the Tibetans to come and destroy the monastery. They forced the Tibetans to come with knives and axes.

Q: Did any people do that?

#39: There was no other choice, they were beating us. People went.

Q: Where were you watching this from?

#39: They had asked the children to come and the elders to stay back. I was there and we told the Chinese they cannot do this and that it was a sin to destroy the monastery.

Q: Where were you?

#39: I was very small and watching close by.

Q: What were your feelings and what were you thinking when you saw what was happening?

#39: I felt very sad when they destroyed the monastery. I had no parents and the monastery was being destroyed; I cried a lot. I thought, "Now I have no parents and no monastery," and we fled.

Q: Who did you turn to speak to or for consolation?

#39: There's no one to tell. I just cried.

Q: Where was your sister?

#39: She was at home.

Q: Could you go to her? Was it possible?

#39: I could go.

Q: What was her reaction?

#39: My sister was also very sad. Like me she had no parents. There was nothing to do but feel sad.

Q: How many Chinese did you see destroying the monastery?

#39: About 20.

Q: And they burnt books and with axes destroyed the inside? Is that correct?

#39: It is the truth, I wouldn't lie.

Q: I know you are not lying. I just want to make sure I understand.

#39: Okay.

Q: What did you do then, you and your sister?

#39: We just stayed, doing farming and looking after the cattle.

Q: Even after the Chinese came, the next day you were still looking after your lands and tending the cattle?

#39: Yes.

Q: How was it different then doing this? This is what you did before they came and you were doing this afterward. Were you afraid of what might happen next?

#39: There was no fear but I felt very sad. Work had to continue; we couldn't leave that.

Q: You still had to work. Life became very different after the Chinese destroyed the monastery?

#39: The change was automatic. When the monastery was destroyed, that was the change. We were sad but it was futile. One would be sad. In this situation we stayed for a year.

Q: After the monastery was destroyed did more Chinese come to the area or did these soldiers leave? Did they stay in the area? What happened?

#39: They said more would come. Those Chinese were staying in the monastery.

Q: The others?

#39: The Chinese kept coming and going.

Q: Some left, but only a small number stayed at the monastery?

#39: They stayed in houses close to the monastery.

Q: What did you and your sister do next? What happened next?

#39: We looked after the farm and reared cattle. There was no other way.

Q: For how long did you do that before something else happened?

#39: I stayed one year after the Chinese destroyed the monastery. Then my younger sister and I fled.

Q: So you stayed a year after the Chinese destroyed the monastery. I understand you were still tending your animals. How was life in your village as you remember changed after the monastery was destroyed? How were people different?

#39: Everything was the same.

Q: Were people scared?

#39: Yes, fear and everybody used to cry after the monastery was destroyed. Some of them were beaten.

Q: Did you see any of that?

#39: Yes, I saw the Chinese beat people to make them destroy the monastery. They said we had to do it and not practice religion. Some were beaten a lot. They said we were not allowed to practice religion.

Q: Did you see them being beaten?

#39: Yes.

Q: What did you feel?

#39: I was very sad.

Q: How long did the beatings go on in the town? Did they stop after a short while? Or did they continue for the year you remained in the village?

#39: For the time being.

Q: For the time being, meaning it continued or it just stopped?

#39: It didn't continue.

Q: Did you talk to your friends about what you had seen and what had happened?

#39: I might have, but I don't remember.

Q: You stayed a year after the monastery was destroyed. What else did you see during the year that you remember?

#39: There were no other changes, except that the monastery was destroyed.

Q: Do you know what year that was in?

#39: No, I don't remember.

Q: When did you learn that you were going to escape; that there was a plan to escape?

#39: Plan? We were orphans and the monastery was destroyed. I was feeling very sad. Earlier other people from our village had fled to India and we just thought we should go

too. We were very young, I was about 11. We thought there was no use staying there; we had no parents and the monastery was destroyed. So we fled to India.

Q: And whose idea was that, yours, your sister or someone else?

#39: My sister and I were grazing the sheep and we said we should flee and we fled. Nobody made plans.

Q: Was it a younger sister?

#39: Yes, the youngest of my sisters. She was living with the second oldest sister while I was living with the one older to me. So we left the sheep and fled.

Q: You both decided together to do that?

#39: Yes.

Q: Did any other people join you?

#39: No.

Q: So you were ten and your sister is 14, I think four years older and you both decided as children that you would have to escape to India.

#39: When I escaped to India I was 11.

Q: There were no adults who helped make this plan? It was just you and your sister?

#39: Yes.

Q: Did any other people go with you?

#39: No.

Q: Just the two of you?

#39: Yes, the two of us.

Q: How did you even begin to leave? What did you do?

#39: In India, the Indian police caught us and they questioned us. So we said that the monastery was destroyed and we had no parents. Our area was very close to India, there's just a mountain pass in between. The Indian police told us to return or they would kill us.

Q: But before we get to that, I am still curious as to how...did you know the way to the border? Did you and your sister know the way to the Indian border?

#39: Yes, I knew. It is very close to the Indian border—just a mountain pass in between.

Q: It was very near. Did you walk the entire way or did you ride any animals?

#39: Walking.

Q: Did you bring food and water with you?

#39: No. Until we reached the Indian border, we had nothing. There they gave us food and tea.

Q: How long did it take for you and your sister to walk to the Indian border?

#39: One day and one night.

Q: One day and one night without any food or water?

#39: Yes.

Q: Did you wonder that maybe you might not make it to the border?

#39: No, there were no thoughts, except that we should reach the border. The police scared us saying that they would beat us and shoot us, but they didn't. Due to fear we did not even feel hungry. There were no thoughts.

Q: What time of the year was it? What season?

#39: Autumn.

Q: So was it hot or was it cold? What was the temperature like?

#39: It was moderate.

Q: Did you in your walking to India—did you come close to any Chinese army? Did you ever feel we might get, we have to watch out, so that we don't get caught?

#39: We were scared we might meet Chinese but we didn't.

Q: You and your sister got to the Indian border and then the Indian border patrol said you must go back?

#39: Yes.

Q: What did you do?

#39: We said we would not go back.

Q: And then what happened?

#39: They took us to where our people were. We met our people.

Q: Where to?

#39: To those people from our area who had escaped earlier.

Q: Where there any people there that you knew? Any Tibetans?

#39: Yes.

Q: And what did you feel when you were safely in India?

#39: The Indians told us that we would die of heat and to go back to Tibet. But I felt that this was okay and it doesn't matter even if I died here.

Q: What were you feeling at that time?

#39: Nothing. There was no thought. I don't remember.

Q: It is not a normal kind of thing for a child to have to do—to travel with her sister over a mountain for a day and night, to escape an army. I can only imagine what that was like. Where do you think your determination came from? Where do you think your will to survive came from at such a young age?

#39: We were orphans and our monastery was destroyed. It made me so sad and I would cry morning and evening. I thought, "What do I do? I cannot remain like this." Our older sisters had their lives. So I thought it was best for us to flee.

Q: Where do you think your strength came from to endure the hardship to get to India?

#39: The strength would be that there was no use remaining there when we had no parents and the monastery was destroyed. That gave us courage and I was sad.

Q: Is there anything you can tell me about your escape that I have not asked that you would like us to know?

#39: No.

Q: Now you are in India in a camp with Tibetans that have also escaped and what was it like where you stayed in this camp across the border in India?

#39: I did farming. We had freedom to practice religion and see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I think it's very happy.

Q: Where was this?

#39: This was when I came to the settlement in Mundgod.

Q: Can you describe the camp across the border?

#39: That place called Vishno [?] was extremely hot. Everyday people died.

Q: You saw people dying there?

#39: Yes, I saw. I was also very sick.

Q: You were ill from the heat or from the food? What were you ill from?

#39: It was from the heat.

Q: And your sister, did she become ill, too?

#39: She had fever and diarrhea.

Q: Were you living in tents or what kind of places were you living in?

#39: It was a huge hall and everybody stayed in groups in it.

Q: In a hall, or a hole?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: H-A-L-L

Q: So the hall was divided up and a certain number of people lived in each part?

#39: Yes.

Q: You were with your sister.

#39: Yes.

Q: When people were becoming ill and you saw people dying, what did you think?

#39: I was ill and due to that I could think of nothing.

Q: How long were you ill for?

#39: For one month.

Q: A whole month?

#39: Yes, I almost died.

Q: You were close to death? Did you get medical care?

#39: Yes.

Q: What saved you?

#39: I think it was the medicine, God and my destiny.

Q: You started to regain your strength?

#39: Yes.

Q: Were the doctors Indians or Tibetans who helped you?

#39: Indians.

Q: After you regained your strength, did your sister also survive?

#39: Yes.

Q: Then what happened?

#39: Then I came to the settlement in Mundgod.

Q: And Mundgod is in India?

#39: Yes.

Q: So you were in Vishno one month or longer?

#39: About one month.

Q: Who sent you to Mundgod?

#39: The Indians.

Q: How did you go there? Did you walk or did you ride? How did you get there?

#39: In vehicles.

Q: Did the Indian government give you clothes? Did you have clothes?

#39: No, I couldn't speak the language.

Q: I'm asking if they gave you clothes to wear. Or were you wearing the clothes that you came to India with?

#39: Yes, they gave.

Q: You and your sister got to Mundgod and what did you feel then when you were going to Mundgod? What were you feeling?

#39: I did not have many thoughts.

Q: Do you remember Mundgod at all?

#39: Yes.

Q: Was it similar to Vishno in terms of where you lived and how you were treated?

#39: Mundgod is better than Vishno.

Q: How was it better?

#39: In the settlement, we are given houses and land. In Vishno there was nothing and it was very hot. And people died.

Q: You are 11 years old and you are still with your sister together?

#39: Yes.

Q: Did they give you and your sister a house or did you share a house with other people?

#39: A separate house.

Q: Just for the two of you?

#39: It was a house meant for five people. There were two rooms and we got one.

Q: Did you start to tend the land like you did in Tibet in some way? Did you work the land in Mundgod?

#39: In Tibet the elders worked on the land. I was a child and used to tend cattle.

Q: Did you work on the land in Mundgod?

#39: Yes.

Q: You were an 11 year old girl and did you till by yourself? Was there an animal helping you or how did you do that?

#39: There were groups of ten people who worked together. The fields were ploughed by oxen.

Q: You had an ox?

#39: No. The Indians had.

Q: No yaks. They had ox.

#39: Yes. [Laughs]

Q: How long were you staying in Mundgod?

#39: About ten years.

Q: Ten years in Mundgod? Both you and your sister?

#39: Yes, we were together.

Q: Did you think that you would be returning to Tibet?

#39: No, I wouldn't be able to go.

Q: You didn't think you would?

#39: No, I didn't think I would get to go back.

Q: Why? What made you think that there was no hope to go back?

#39: That time I was very young; I wouldn't know the way back to my village. We had come so far.

Q: But did you think that somehow you would be able to return at some time?

#39: That I think so. Even now I think.

Q: So you were ten years in Mundgod. Did you go to school in Mundgod?

#39: No.

Q: You only worked all the time there?

#39: How could we go to school? We had no parents, no relatives. We had to feed ourselves and earn a livelihood.

Q: Were you taught a trade in Mundgod or an additional skill?

#39: I learnt carpet weaving.

Q: What did your sister do?

#39: She worked in the fields.

Q: After ten years, why did you leave Mundgod? Did you want to leave or did you have to leave?

#39: I got work as a house mother in the Tibetan Children's Village in Bylakuppe. I had children and wanted them to get an education as I am myself not educated. So I joined the Tibetan Children's Village as a matron.

Q: Did the government sent you?

#39: The Tibetan Children's Village announced that they needed a matron. So I came here [to Bylakuppe].

Q: They needed a teacher?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: A matron.

Q: A matron does what?

#39: She looks after the children.

Q: After ten years in Mundgod, did you get used to the climate? Was it still hard for you to adjust to in warm climate?

#39: Apart from fever or colds, I faced no problems.

Q: But you got used to the change over time?

#39: Yes.

Q: After ten years there was a need for a nanny in Bylakuppe and so the government wanted to send you down here. Did they wish you to come with your sister too or was it just you alone?

#39: Not my sister. I had my children. I was married.

Q: Let's go back for a moment. So you got married in Mundgod?

#39: Yes.

Q: What age did you get married?

#39: At the age of 21.

Q: That was right at the end of your stay in Mundgod you got married? When did you have a child?

#39: Very soon—within one year. There were no gaps.

Q: So you had one child in Mundgod or more?

#39: Three.

Q: Three children? Well, I am trying to understand the time. If you were there for ten years and you came here when you were 11, and you are 21, either you had to have been married a little earlier or had the children a little later. You had three children?

#39: Yes.

Q: And then the government said they needed a nanny in Bylakuppe. How did you feel about leaving your sister?

#39: I was sad.

Q: You had been through so much together. It must have been very, very hard to leave her.

#39: Yes.

Q: Bylakuppe as a nanny and you came with your children. When you got here, what was your first impression?

#39: It's a good place.

Q: Do you know what year it was that you came here?

#39: 1984.

Q: So when you came here, did you know anybody?

#39: No.

Q: Did you come with your husband?

#39: Yes.

Q: So it was you, your husband and your children?

#39: Yes.

Q: What was the first year like living here? What did you do?

#39: My husband worked as a cook. I was a house mother, looking after the children, washing and cooking for them just like you would do in your own house.

Q: Was there any problem for you to adjust to the climate here?

#39: No, not at all.

Q: Did you experience any problems when you first came here?

#39: No.

Q: Have your children been happy here?

#39: They liked it. I send them to school and I worked as a house mother.

Q: Do you still work as a nanny?

#39: Not now. When my husband retired, I left work. It was in 2002.

Q: How old are your children now?

#39: The oldest one is 33 years old, the second 31, and the youngest maybe around 28.

Q: What would you do if it was possible for you to return to Tibet?

#39: I would be happy because I could see my relatives. However, the older ones would be dead and the young ones—we would not know them and they would not know us. I would like to go, but I know there would be such problems.

Q: Have you had any contacts with your relatives in Tibet since you left?

#39: No.

Q: Where is your sister now?

#39: She was in Mundgod. She died there during childbirth. Her children are there.

Q: This year?

#39: Three years back. Her children are there.

Q: That's very sad. What advice would you like to give the next generation of Tibetans living in exile?

#39: Study hard and serve your government. Make yourself useful to the government. Studying will also help in earning a good livelihood. It's very good to get an education. This is my advice.

Q: Yes, you've certainly learnt that lesson. What do you hoped would be preserved about Tibet?

#39: To practice your religion and not harm others.

Q: What do you think has been lost forever and that can never be recovered?

#39: That I am separated from my parents and relatives.

Q: Thank you so much for telling your story. I feel honored to be able to hear it from you.

#39: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW