

Dechen Lhamo's Account of Her Life in Tibet
As recorded by
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I was born in Gyangtse in Utsang Province, a town that was smaller than Lhasa. In my family were three older brothers, two sisters-in-law, and my father. My mother died when I was about 12 years old and a sister died when she was small. We were farmers—we cultivated crops and raised animals and milked them. I didn't go to school. I worked in the fields and helped with the cooking.

Support for the Monasteries

There were 16 monasteries in the Gyangtse region. There were three monasteries in Gyangtse itself, where monks lived throughout the year. The other monks lived in monasteries in villages, but during *Losar* [Tibetan New Year] and the annual prayer festival, they came to Gyangtse and congregated at the main monastery. During these festivals, they received donations of food from the people. My father was employed by Takra Rinpoche, the regent in Lhasa. My father was responsible for going to the villages to collect grain and butter.

During the 5th month of the year, my father distributed the grain and butter to the 16 monasteries in Gyangtse. This was when my father measured out the grain and gave a two-month supply to each monk. The butter went to the kitchens in the monasteries. Except for the festival period, the monks had to fend for themselves in their villages. In Tibet, most of the monks worked for their living and their birth families had to bring them provisions.

Marriage Customs

Before a bride's hand was sought, an astrological calculation would be charted and if things matched, arrangements for the marriage went ahead. There would be a *longchang*, when the groom's family would bring *chang*, home-brewed beer. Then there would be a second *longchang*. In our region, unmarried girls wore a *chong*, a bluish-yellowish ornament, on the top of their heads to symbolize that they were not married. At the third *longchang*, the *chong* was removed by the boy's family and replaced with a turquoise ornament. The marriage would be held a few days later. The bride and bridegroom did not see each other until the marriage ceremony.

In Tibet every family has their respective deities. The deity on the girl's side was informed that she had been given away and the boy's side informed their deity that a new person would be joining the family. Before the bride arrived, the monks prayed during the night. It was over by the time she arrived. In Tibet, a religious ritual was performed at the home of the bride the night before she was to be given away, requesting her family's deity to release her. And the night before she was to arrive at the boy's house, his family deity was asked to accept the new person.

There is an auspicious time for a marriage and the bride had to arrive at the bridegroom's house exactly at that time. She would then be given tea and the boy's family would give her a set of clothes, which she had to put on for the ceremony. She had to take off all the clothing from her family and wear the one provided by the boy's family. Then the ceremony took place. During the marriage, the bride did not sit up. She would be lying down and nobody could see her face

when they offered her *khata* [a ceremonial scarf] as she was wrapped up! To remain covered was a sign of shyness.

The actual ceremony was performed on the day the bride reached the house. The next few days were feasts. Some grand parties went on for five to 10 days. Food was provided to the invitees and there was dancing. After the celebrations, the family members would see her and she them. If she had a sister, her family left her with the bride for about a month; in some cases, a sister stayed for three months or a year. The bride did not venture out and if she had to go to a monastery, an auspicious day was selected.

When the bride reached the boy's home, a list of the items given to the girl was prepared, as no one knew if the marriage would last. It was good if the marriage was successful, but in case it wasn't and they got divorced, the woman got back whatever her family had provided her with. Also, if things didn't work out, the bridegroom's family would give the bride's family wages for all the years she had worked for them. That was the custom.

When I was 21, my parents arranged my marriage. I learned that I was to be married about a month before the marriage, when the bridegroom's family came to our house to talk about it. Only after the decision was made to give me away did my family tell me. A few days after the third *longchang*, the groom's family arrived to escort me to Phari, where I was married. Phari is on the border with India and it took five days on horseback to get there.

About an hour before the end of the journey, a pillow was placed on the neck of the horse and I lay over it, with my head and body covered by a large, striped cloth, which is normally worn over the back. After about 15 days, those who accompanied me from home went back. A relative was left with me for about three months. She stayed as my companion because I was a stranger to my husband's family members.

They did not ask me to immediately carry out any responsibilities. While living with my family, I had to do a lot of fieldwork; however, in Phari there was no fieldwork, so life wasn't as physically demanding. As for food, we did not eat a lot of roasted barley flour in Phari, but we had rice and wheat flour, which we got from elsewhere, such as India and Bhutan. Food was better in Phari.

Changes under the Chinese Occupation

About a year after I reached Phari, the Chinese implemented "reforms" in Tibet. Most of the people of Phari were traders, so they had money. When people saved money, they normally kept the new 100 Tibetan notes. The Chinese announced that Tibetan money was invalid, that the new notes were the currency of the rebels. They said only Chinese currency was valid and the people had to turn in their Tibetan money. But the Chinese didn't give any Chinese money for the Tibetan money they collected. In this way, the Chinese bankrupted the whole of Phari.

First it was the money. Then, the tax payers who owned land and officials of the district administration were all captured. All the fathers of the wealthy families were taken away to prison. They were kept in Phari for about a week and then they were taken to prisons in Gyantse, Kongpo and elsewhere. Their homes were confiscated. I do not know whether it was the Chinese or the Tibetan workers who took away all the valuable items like gold and silver. However, the bedding, household items, and animals were distributed among the poorer people of Phari.

The place where we lived was located a small distance from Phari and was called Chugya. One day, some people from Phari were brought for a struggle session and I was forced to watch

it. The prisoners were chained in yellow iron, which looked like golden bangles. When they moved, the handcuffs became tighter and tighter and gradually the prisoners just fell down. The prisoners were made to stoop down low for long periods of time, while having their hair and ears pulled.

Arrests, Imprisonment and Redistribution of Wealth

When people were arrested, they were called to a re-education meeting, but never returned. When the Chinese attacked Lhasa, my father was among the first to be arrested in Gyangtse. He was called a “Dalai rebel” because he was among the people who received and organized His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s visit to Domo. He died in prison.

During the year of the reforms, my husband was sent many times to Kalimpong to deliver letters for officials from Phari District. He also carried letters for officials from Lhasa to Kalimpong. He was accused of being a “running dog” and was given the name “running dog of the Dalai.” The Chinese sent my husband to do hard labor. First he was sent to Domo and later to Karkhang in Gyangtse. There was a government warehouse there, where all the grain that was confiscated from the Tibetan villagers was transported in carts. He was taken there to transport the grain. At that time, I was not able to see him.

The Chinese also imprisoned my father-in-law. He became blind in prison from a bluish membrane, just like a cataract, and so he was released after six months. My mother-in-law was subjected to struggle sessions. I had been in my village visiting my brother, who had been released from prison. When I arrived back in Phari, my mother-in-law had been subjected to struggle sessions the day before. She could drink a little gruel, but she could not get up for many days. After she became somewhat better, we heard that a meeting was being held and there was talk about putting her back in prison. Fearing that she would be imprisoned again, she escaped in the night. She fled from Phari, alone, to Bhutan.

Our lands and most of our house, possessions, and animals were distributed to the people. Each person was allocated 10 animals and our family had 40 altogether. The house had about five rooms. On the outer side, there were six or seven rooms that we rented out to others. Except for the kitchen where we lived, the rest of the house was given away by the Chinese to other people. We were also allocated land. The Chinese forced the people of Phari to cultivate the fields. The Chinese made people light a fire near the fields to prevent the crops from freezing and no one could sleep because we had to keep the fires lit. Despite the smoke, the crops still froze.

I was alone except for my two daughters—one was three years old and the other five. I felt helpless. Wherever I looked, there was misery. Since I knew fieldwork, I cultivated the land, making my daughters help me bring the manure. My daughters also grazed the animals. The other nomads would help us in small ways when they could, when we were out of sight of the Tibetan leaders appointed by the Chinese. When officials were around, we could not talk to other people otherwise they would be arrested. The leaders were poor Tibetans who were appointed as officials by the Chinese. They also reprimanded us if we wore good clothes, saying that we could no longer wear such clothes. They were very powerful. They did the distribution of the clothes of the wealthy people of Phari to the beggars. They were the people who conducted the struggle sessions.

Terrible things happened in Tibet and people suffered terribly. My older sister-in-law jumped into the river at around the time I made my escape. The Chinese had destroyed the holy statues and scriptures, but she kept a small holy pot. When it was found, she was beaten. She

then jumped into the river. Her three children were left behind. My sisters-in-law were sisters and the younger one was subjected to struggle sessions. She died from the struggle sessions.

Escape from Tibet

My blind father-in-law, my two daughters, and I escaped from Phari around 1966 or 1967, just when the Chinese were about to implement the Cultural Revolution. I couldn't escape earlier because the Bhutanese were restricting the passage of Tibetan refugees over the mountain pass and were handing them over to the Chinese, who would beat and imprison them. When we left, there were about 30 people from Phari in our group. My younger daughter was six and my older one was nine when we escaped. When we took that route, we saw the bright lights of flashlights and, fearing that they were the Chinese, we went another way and took an isolated path. It took us one whole night until we arrived in Bhutan.

When I reached the capital of Bhutan, there were many people of Phari origin who had made camp there. We were kept in Bhutan for about three months and then went to India because the Dalai Lama was there. Due to some legal problem, 30 of us were imprisoned in an Indian jail in Siliguri for about three months. I was reunited with my husband a year later, after we reached Dharamsala. Then we were sent to construct roads.