

Gapa Akar's Account of His Life in Tibet
As recorded by
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My name is Gapa Akar. My family members were nomads. We had been nomads for a very long time in the province of Kham. We raised animals, like yaks and sheep, and we used horses a little bit.

Life as a Nomad in Tibet

We had thousands of sheep and 400-500 yaks. We milked the female yaks and made butter and cheese from their milk. In the morning, we took the animals to the hills, wherever there was good grass and good water. In wintertime, we brought the animals down and made nice sleeping areas for the animals. All our food and clothing came from the animals.

If an animal got sick, Tibetan doctors treated them. Or, we could ask the lamas to chant prayers or give us blessed pills for the animals, which helped. If an animal suffered a cut, the prayers from the scriptures chanted by a shaman helped. The shaman also blew on animals' cuts and swellings, which caused the swellings to subside and the wounds to heal. There were shamans with such powers. Then there were certain animal illnesses that were caused by harmful beings that were warded off by reciting prayers. The shamans also helped humans.

When we were out with the animals, there was no time to sit, but we chanted prayers. We sometimes sang a song when we were very happy herding the animals. When there were plenty of flowers around and beautiful pastures with good grass for the animals that made them grow healthy, we were happy. When there was no snow or rain and plants sprouted from the ground, we played games. Two or three herders would play games and sing songs together. There were games that tested our strength and speed. We also threw rocks or played with stones.

It was a good, happy life. There were no problems with food or clothing because we milked the animals, drank the milk, made cheese, and ate the butter. We obtained wool, hair, and meat from the animals.

My parents had faith in the Buddhist dharma. We would hold a rosary in our hands and rotate the prayer wheel. However, except for inviting monks to recite prayers at home and performing rituals once a year, there was no time to be more observant. I learned many prayers as a boy and I know them by heart. My family did not discriminate among the religious sects. There was never any discrimination. We had faith in all lamas. Whichever lama visited, we made offerings of whatever we had.

The Chinese Demand Labor and Confiscate Animals

Life started to change when the Communist Chinese appeared. They seized everything. The first change that affected me was when the Chinese said, "Work for us for 15 years constructing roads. We will install electricity and water. Leave your work in your community. Come and work for us." I went to construct roads for the Chinese for one month. At that time, we were not treated badly by the Chinese, like being beaten. However, working with soil and rocks was tiring and we were not free to move about much. We had to focus on the work. Each person was equipped with a spade, which we used to dig out the pastures. We were given a small amount of

money. We had to eat our own food while working for the Chinese and what we got paid didn't cover food and clothing.

The Chinese told us, "The wealth that you possess--give your wealth to the Communist Party. We will be good to you later. Think of the future." Our wealth was our animals. The Chinese had cooperative shops and they wanted us to donate our wealth to the shops. But the majority of the people declined and said, "We will keep our own animals and continue to do our work."

So a big meeting was held at Chekudho. When all the leaders gathered for the meeting, the Chinese said, "Today, you must issue orders to the people to give up their wealth. If that does not happen, you will not be allowed to go home." The nomads had to give up their animals and the farmers had to give up their lands. The leaders said, "We cannot order the people to give up their wealth to the Communist Party." So the Chinese captured the leaders and imprisoned them.

Then the people requested that the leaders be released. However, they did not release the leaders and the Chinese told us, "Do you prefer a society of violence or peace? You should think it over. If you choose a society of peace, give up your wealth to the government and become a member of the Communist Party. Then there will be peace. If you want violence, we will launch an assault and create a violent society, so prepare for violence." We replied, "We cannot give up our wealth to the government. Whether you cause violence or kill us, we will not accept this order."

Nomads are Attacked and Killed

So the Chinese attacked. There was a monastery called Ranyag Gonpa where there were 500 monks. Six hundred Chinese soldiers attacked and the attack lasted for about two weeks. The monks did not have guns, but there were many swords hanging in the temple. The monks charged the soldiers with these swords—I saw 10 to 15 monks charging and all were killed by gunfire before they could reach the Chinese soldiers. I had five uncles who were monks and my father and I went to the monastery to join in the fight against the Chinese. The Chinese fired cannons and machine guns on the monastery and destroyed it completely. My father and uncles were all killed in the same room by cannon shells. Of the 500 monks, only nine monks survived; the Chinese killed the rest.

My mother, wife, and children were all captured and taken away. The Chinese did not physically capture them, but they were with the animals and they were driven along with the animals. I fled to Lhasa with a sibling and two or three people from my village. There were many people fleeing and, along the way, nomads gave us small amounts of food. At that time the Chinese had not yet attacked Lhasa. When we got to Lhasa, there were many Chinese soldiers there and people were afraid to speak about what had been happening in Kham. The people of Lhasa would say, "We dare not speak because there is a huge Chinese presence. Such a sad situation has come to pass. It is a disaster." At that time, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was living in his palace.

Fleeing from the Chinese Soldiers

In the 1st lunar month, the Chinese attacked Lhasa, attacked Nagchu, attacked everywhere. That is when Lhasa was lost. Many Chinese soldiers arrived and destroyed everything and His Holiness the Dalai Lama had to take flight. There were tens of thousands of Chinese troops. The

Chinese had planned ahead and surrounded the whole of Lhasa. Initially, the Chinese pretended to be good, pretended that they were gentle, but in the end, they showed that they wanted everything. The people of Lhasa were calm. The reason was that the leaders did not know how to react. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a lama and, except for religion, he did not interfere much.

We fled and later we encountered the Chinese again. The Chinese attacked here and there and we sought ways to escape. We had nothing to eat, no possessions, not even ammunition with which to fight. We had already used the ammunition in earlier encounters. Each man was left with just 10 to 20 bullets, not enough to fight with. We had to kill wild animals and looked for ways to escape from the Chinese. That was the only way to survive.

I fled towards the Changthang Plateau, but Chinese blocked our route so we did not have food. Instead of eating, we kept going to the river to drink water. We trudged day and night and there was no time to untie our belts or bootlaces at night. Because these remained tied for 18 days and nights, I ended up infested with lice around my waistband and ankles. We hardly slept and it was so bad that the eyes of some of us bulged out; they were unable to see and they fell down. We suffered such hardships.

I continued for days and nights without turning back until I reached the Indian border army camp at Ladakh. The Ladakhi soldiers were armed with guns and they crossed the huge Indus River in a boat. Some of the soldiers got out of the boat and waded towards us, charging at us. Maybe they thought we were Chinese. We were scared, thinking that the Ladakhi men could be Chinese. A Ladakhi soldier who spoke Tibetan asked, "How and why did you come here?" We replied, "We've experienced great suffering. The Chinese have caused such misery. Our lama, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, has left for India and we have followed him. We have escaped." They gave us rice, wheat, bread and tea and they kept us there for around a week. Then they said that we had to leave and took us across the river. Finally, our lives were saved.

Thoughts on Self-Immolations

Those people who self-immolate do it for the Tibetan cause. They must feel that it is futile to fight or challenge the Chinese in any other way. Living under oppression, they self-immolate and sacrifice their lives for the Tibetan cause. I think it will make the world aware of what is happening and what the Chinese are doing. I think this is beneficial. However, Communist China is a huge country and very wealthy and it lies and deceives other countries. The Chinese say, "We are doing good." But the point is that they are inflicting such terrible suffering that people are forced to sacrifice their lives.