

Sonam Bhuti's Account of Her Life in Tibet
As recorded by
TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
on December 26, 2013 in Bylakuppe, India

I am 90 years old and I was born in 1923 in Gyangtse Khelkhar, a small village in the Kabshi region of Utsang, Tibet. In Gyangtse Khelkhar, people cultivated lands and grew grains, peas, and mustard for oil. Also, there were cows, yaks, sheep, and *dzomo* [females bred from a yak and a cow]. The yaks and sheep grazed on the mountains, while the *dzomo* and cows were raised at home and milked. During the day, the women did weaving and spinning. It was a very happy place.

There was a monastery located one mountain pass away from our village called Gaden Datsang, and we invited monks from there to come and read prayers at home. Lay people practiced the *dharma* [Buddha's teachings] at a monastery called Nyungnay Lhakhang. Here, lay people observed silent meditation and other *dharma* practices on auspicious days. Lay people could freely practice religion in those days.

Holy Pilgrimage Site

There was a very holy pilgrimage site in our village. The main deity there is Guru Padmasambhava, the master from India who established Buddhism in Tibet during the 8th century. It is said that he sat in retreat for three years at this site. From the outside, you could see just a small wall, but once inside, it was a large cave with images carved on the rocks and butter lamps carved out of huge rocks. The cave is called Khelkhar Daduk and this cave still exists.

To reach the pilgrimage site, you used a long ladder that had 18 steps. Above it was a flat platform, big enough to hold two people. From there, you had to climb up using a rope. Then there was a narrow space called the Elephant's Belly, which was hollow and totally dark. You slid down the rock and the caretaker caught you there. The caretaker would make an offering and move an incense stick around and after that, water instantly sprang from the rock and water droplets formed on the rocks, like mist or glass beads. We applied the water to our heads.

Then there was another section that was said to assess the magnitude of sins. It was very narrow, so you had to walk sideways between two rocks for about 30 minutes. It was said that it was more difficult for great sinners; some got through easily and others could not and screamed in fear.

Marriage and Work

Marriages in our custom were arranged in secret and there was no falling in love with each other. When I was 19, my parents sent me to my future husband's house in Phari without telling me that I was about to be married. In the summer in Phari, there was a horseracing show and I was told that I should go watch it. Then, when I was taken to my future husband's home, they adorned me with jewelry and fine clothes. The real wedding, the grand one, took place a year later.

I did not have any wish to marry into that family and thought I should run away. There was a very old lady, a neighbor, who did divinations and I asked the old lady, "Is it better for me to pick a fight and leave or run away?" The old lady said, "You will never be able to get away. Do

not go. Remain here for you will never succeed in getting away, because of karma.” I did my best and stayed. I had eight children. Eight children! Four sons and four daughters. In Tibet, there were lots of births because people didn’t practice birth control. Some women gave birth to 12 or 13 children.

From the age of 16, my husband took responsibility for his family. He was a businessman and very smart. We had a very large shop in Phari and twice a year we went to Kolkata in India to buy merchandise. I went only once, when my husband and I joined His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Rinpoche on a pilgrimage to Nepal. On the way back, we purchased goods in Kolkata.

When I was first married, the shop was small and, at times, the wares were displayed outside. After I came, business improved and it became a large shop. We sold a variety of goods, including gold, turquoise, coral, pearl, medicines for fevers and other illnesses, fabrics, glass panes for houses, and different kinds of nails. The store was located in front and the house was in the back, with a storeroom between the shop and the house. On one side of the house was the prayer room and we had a caretaker, a monk, who took care of the daily water offerings and such. There was a gate and a large courtyard where visitors could tether horses and mules; this is where we kept our *dzomo* and cows.

Life in Phari

Phari was a very good place. The wealthy managed shops and the poor worked in the fields. It was a meeting point for business people from India, Tibet, and Bhutan. There were no vehicles and men could make a living as laborers for wealthy merchants, transporting goods on horses and mules. Women could spin wool and weave. Also, some people collected vegetables from the mountains, which they sold. It was very easy to have a happy life there. People got up in the morning, cleaned and dusted, and made ritual offerings; some went to the temples and others circumambulated. People practiced *dharma* and it was a very happy time. You were not in a hurry and there was no fear. It was an incredibly happy place.

In Phari, there were five groups of taxpayers who owned good agricultural lands and houses and served the Tibetan Government. Our family possessed lands and we were very well off. The taxpayers had to serve government officials and the postmen, who delivered letters from the government. There was a wooden board called a *changpang* that was about three feet in diameter on which was listed the name of the family that was responsible for serving government officials on a given day. If an official arrived on your family’s day of duty, you served him by fetching water and firewood—in those days, we had no electricity and tap water. If no officials came, that was fine; it was your gain. Besides this, there were no difficult taxes.

There were two types of schools in Phari. There was the private Surkhang School, which was established by a business manager of the Surkhang aristocratic family in Phari—the children from rich families attended this school. A son and a daughter of mine attended this school—at that time, I had only three children and one of them was very small. There was also a school for the poor, which His Holiness the Dalai Lama took care of. In Phari, a tax called *gathang* was collected on all horses and mules that came from outside. His Holiness said that these taxes need not be remitted to him, but should be used to establish and maintain a school for the poor. So a school for the poor was established.

The Chinese Occupation

Life in Phari began to change when the Chinese arrived. Initially, armed Chinese dressed in blue appeared, riding horses. There was one Chinese who knew how to speak Tibetan. Without asking permission, they entered the homes of wealthy families and pitched many tents in the courtyards, perhaps in readiness for those who were to come later. They stood on the top of the houses with their guns; while the rest of the Chinese slept at night, at least two men stood guard in the night, taking turns.

Then the Chinese in blue said that the older Tibetan people would get some sort of salary. Perhaps the plan was to give propaganda lessons to the elders, to transform their minds. The Chinese insisted on establishing a Youth Association and a Women's Association. They paid *dhayen* [Chinese silver coins], to the prominent Tibetans, who then told the people, "You must join the Youth Association. You must join the Women's Association. That will be very good." In this way, the Youth and Women's Associations were formed. I never wanted to join the Youth or Women's Associations, but I sent my daughter to school, where the Chinese persuaded her to join the Youth Association.

Under the Chinese occupation, there was no stability. After His Holiness the Dalai Lama left Tibet, the Chinese showed Tibetan currency notes to the people and said, "This money is totally useless. Wiping your bottom with it would be a sin. This is not valid currency. Only Chinese currency is valid. So bring your money and we will replace it with Chinese currency." The Chinese took the money, gave a receipt on a small piece of white paper, and said, "Bring this receipt later and we will pay you." Irrespective of the economic status of the family, everything was collected. But, they never gave us any Chinese money for the Tibetan money they collected.

In Phari, crops did not grow and we could not grow grains for human consumption. *Jangpa* was the only plant that grew in Phari—it's like a sprout and is very nutritious for horses and mules—but, food grains had to come from other places like Tsang, Thoe, Bhutan, and India. People came to sell every kind of food items, and it was very good. You were free to purchase what you liked. Then the Chinese ordered that we were not allowed to make individual purchases and that all provisions were to be delivered to the Chinese shop, from where it would be sold. People were not allowed to make individual purchases. The Chinese had planned this right from the beginning.

The Chinese believed that those of us who belonged to the class of *ngadhak* [leaders], *ngatsab* [deputy to the leaders], *chugdhak* [wealthy], and *telpa* [taxpayers] were the worst category of people and when we went to buy *tsampa* [flour made from roasted barley], the Chinese storekeeper said, "Today you can have it because it is the first time. But, from now on, your class will not get any *tsampa*. You will not be sold any." The poor could obtain *tsampa* and other food items from the store, but we, the well off, were not going to be sold anything, even *tsampa*. We were not sold anything.

One day, the Chinese said, "You are not allowed to keep any guns at home. Bring all the guns and we will issue permits for the guns. You are not allowed to keep guns without a license." We owned only one gun, which had a protective cord attached to it that was given to us by a *lama* [spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism]. Believing the Chinese, we gave the protective cord and gun to them. After all the guns were collected, once again they said that they would issue permits later and they gave us a piece of white paper. All the guns were confiscated and we never saw them again. It was a lie and the guns were gone for good.

In the past in Tibet, we used to work according to the seasons and the work would get done. But, the Chinese constantly said, “You must practice *thon kye, do chung*.” That means to increase production and reduce expenses, meaning that we should not eat much. That was the education. And then they would also say, “You should not remain idle, but make an effort to earn money. You must create farmlands.” In those days, we Tibetans had enough and we did not need more, but the Chinese forced Tibetans to create farmlands and construct roads.

Imprisonment and Struggle Sessions

My husband had to undergo political re-education. The Chinese very cleverly said, “Come for a meeting regarding political education.” However, instead of political education, their plan was to imprison them. All the prominent people were called to a meeting one night, but once there, they were told to stay back for education; for many people it was actually a prison, only a nice title, “Political Education,” was given to it. The Chinese had already prepared a list that indicated that such and such a person must get political education in the jail. They were told they should tell their family members to bring bedding. The Chinese never gave a reason for arresting us. They arrested the prominent people: the *ngadhak* [leaders], the *ngatsab* [deputy to the leaders], the *chukdhak* [wealthy], the *telpa* [taxpayers]. Their names were all on the list.

Some of the men who were arrested were allowed to study outside the jail, but all the men, those inside and outside the prison, were issued with a book, which they were told to study. The Chinese said, “The content is the same. If those inside study well, they can be released. If those outside do not study well, they will be imprisoned. The study matter is the same.” My children’s father was among the outside group, and he had more freedom than the men inside the jail and was allowed to return home. In the morning, we normally prayed and read the scriptures. In one day, six different groups of interrogators came. If we were reading a scripture when the interrogators arrived, we hid it under a pillow behind us and pretended to read the book the Chinese had given us.

The Chinese called the people of Phari to a meeting and asked, “Do you have any suggestions regarding subjecting this family to *thamzing* [struggle sessions]?” The people of Phari replied, “We have no suggestions. We do not have anything against them. They give us food regardless of whether we have money or not. They take care of the people. We have no suggestions.” Our family was never subjected to a struggle session because the people raised their voices. However, others suffered so much, like imprisonment and being brought out and subjected to *thamzing*.

After the prominent people had been put in prison, the rich families’ agricultural lands, *dzomo*, and all their animals were listed and taken away on the grounds that they would be distributed to the people. Agricultural implements, farmlands, animals—everything was confiscated. All the possessions of the rich families were confiscated and distributed to the people. However, our house was not yet given away because we had four paid, permanent servants living at home: two manservants and two maids. The Chinese said, “The house must be divided and given to them, the manservants and maids.” However, the servants cried, saying, “We do not want the house. The employers and we employees have lived together and eaten together. We will not leave, nor do we desire the house.”

The Chinese claim, “We did not conduct *thamzing*.” But the Chinese trained the Tibetans, the “Activists,” to do *thamzing*. They were told, “You must do this and this to your employers.” Today, the Chinese claim, “The Tibetans demolished the monasteries. The Tibetans did

everything.” But, it was the Chinese who trained people and issued instructions. The general public had been bribed with money. They were happy, unaware of what was going to happen later. The poor were very happy. When the Chinese issued orders, perhaps the poor had no other choice but to follow orders. Initially, the Chinese gave salaries and gave orders and the poor were forced to do so. Later the poor came to India.

Escape to India

We stayed in Phari for 10 months after His Holiness the Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959, and then we fled. I was 35 when I fled with my three surviving children who were born in Tibet. Despite making numerous plans, we failed to flee any earlier. The Chinese had bribed people close to us to keep guard during the day. They kept watch as we moved things around in the shop, suspecting we might be packing. In the night, a man was stationed in front of the shop. He, too, was a friend and was armed with a gun. Another was positioned near the gate. There were guards both day and night. We could not leave and could not forward any of our possessions.

When we finally fled, I thought, “It doesn’t matter if we have nothing, as long as we can flee from here.” After the journey, there was a Bhutanese merchant we knew who used to come to Phari, and he said to us, “I thought you were not going to come. You’ve left the store and everything, and now you’re here.” I replied, “It doesn’t matter if we have nothing because we’ve escaped from hell.”

Due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, everything is good. The Indian Government has been incredibly kind to us. Should His Holiness the Dalai Lama pass away, I am worried about what will happen to us. I am very worried that we might be handed over to the Chinese.