

The Sufferings of Tibetan Female Political Prisoners

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Ever since Communist China invaded Tibet, Tibet has had a spur of political campaigns, like in other areas in mainland China. During these campaigns, many Tibetans were killed, imprisoned, and tortured by the Chinese government. According to the statistics given by the exiled Tibetan government, 1.2 million Tibetans have died under abnormal conditions. Just within the year of 2008, Tibetans of all three Tibetan regions have launched waves of protests. These protests have culminated into one of the largest protest campaigns recorded in history. This protest movement is referred by Tibetans as the protest movement by the youth. The younger generations have become the backbone of the resistance, with women accounting for a considerable portion.

These protestors are often captured as political prisoners and incarcerated in what is known in Chinese as “Laogai” camps. The word “Laogai” signifies the labor reform camp system in China. The Laogai system in Tibet is essentially the same as it is in China. Even though the Laogai has changed its name to “People’s internal conflict”, its system is still stricter and more severe than the system that governs common criminals.

Now I’ll give a brief account of six female political prisoners in the Laogai camps in Tibet:

The first woman’s name was **Pachen**. She was from Gonjo County, Kham, Tibet. Though she was a nun since childhood, she had to join guerrilla forces fighting against the Chinese military forces due to grim situations at the time. She took part in many desperate battles against the Chinese military forces. She took part in a number of desperate battles, but eventually the guerilla forces were defeated. Bachen and many of her comrades were captured and thrown into prison. Bachen spent 21 long years in prison, and endured much plight while witnessing the dark side of humanity. As a young woman, Pachen’s youth was spent in the prisons and laogai/labor reform camps. As a female Tibetan political prisoner, she tolerated various tortures which the outside have not seen, heard, or could ever imagine experiencing. She was deprived of food and clothing, suffered abuse and beatings by the Chinese Communist government, and thoroughly battered physically and emotionally. However, her harsh realities only made her more resolute. Bachen never gave up hope on the Tibetan land and people, both of which she deeply loved. Bachen later fled to India, and met His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She completed her Buddhist education in the exile community and becomes a respected religious figure. In her later years, she travels around the world to spread about the truth in Tibet, and to advocate for her country’s freedom. She later passed away in the Dharmsala due to illness.

The second woman I am going to talk about was called **Ama Ade**. In 1934, she was born as a child of the Dupeng Tsang family in Kham, Tibet. At that time, Tibet was very politically unstable. And China’s invasion desires were becoming gradually clearer. The Chinese government blatantly destroyed monasteries along with capturing and killed many Buddhist monks and nuns. At that time, people suspected that Ama Ade’s father

was killed by Chinese Communist Party officials. After many more tumultuous experiences, Ade worked together with a friend named Pema Gyaltzen to kill Chinese Communist Party officials including the head county official. Due to this incident, she was arrested in her home in the pastoral areas on October 16th, 1958. She was forced to abandon her two children. After her arrest, Ade served a 16 year term in prison in various prisons in Kham, Tibet. During this long torturous experience, she faced extreme starvation, beatings, sexual assaults, forced blood draws, and participated in extreme laborious physical activities. Afterwards, even though she fulfilled her sentence and was supposed/ to be released again, she was accused of the crime of “obstinacy of thoughts”, and sent to further reform herself in labor reform camps. She was stripped of all political rights during this period. Ama Ade, in total, spent a total of 28 difficult years in prison and what is referred to as the “production team”. Afterwards, after a slight loosening in political rule, she was bailed out by friends for a visit to her hometown. Her mother had already passed away, after much mental turmoil. And her son had become mentally ill and later drowned in the river. Her daughter was raised by fellow villagers. The wife of her friend, Pema Gyaltzen, suffered from mental illness and soon passed on. Despite of her sufferings, Ama Ade still kept true to her faith. She was exiled to Nepal in 1987, and met family members there who she has not seen for 29 years. She also met His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and traveled frequently to western countries to spread the truth about Tibet. Now she is spending her later years in Dharmasala.

Nima Dolma was born in 1970 in Lhasa. In 1978, she and her mother secretly posted slogans and disseminated many pamphlets against China. They also participated in many of the protests then occurring in Lhasa. On April 18, 1989, a troop of armed police rushed into Dolma’s home, arresting and detaining her mother in prison. The next day, her elder sister and father were detained too. After interrogation, her father was released, but her sister was put into Gondzhe Detention Center. Her father told Dolma, “They will come to arrest you too. Put on more clothes.” Exactly as her father predicted, armed police officers broke into Dolma’s home and carried her away to the military detention center. She was only given one piece of steamed bread per day, and sometimes even nothing for food. One month later, she was sent to Gondzhe Prison. She asked to be imprisoned in the same cell with her mother, but her request was rejected. About two months after she was sent to this prison, she fell seriously ill. She asked to be sent to a hospital, but she was sternly refused. Instead, they forced her to clean the cell, because some supervisors were coming for prison inspections. In August 1989, the prison nursing staff and a prison staff came to the cell to draw blood from all political prisoners, including Nima – routinely every prisoner should have his/her blood drawn twice. Nima became weaker and weaker as a result. When her conditions turned critical, she could not fight the effects of fecal incontinence. The prison guards who heard about this immediately came and kicked her on her hips, resulting in renal ptosis. Because of her worsening conditions, she was sent to a nearby hospital where she stayed for two months.

During her imprisonment, consecutive disasters struck her family. Her seven-year-old daughter died because of eating a piece of poisonous food. Even with this tragedy, Nima was not allowed to visit her daughter. Under long periods of duress, Nima's sister became mentally abnormal even after she was released from prison. Nima’s younger brother was

later stabbed to death by police officers. Her mother, after hearing this news, became seriously mentally ill. Due to their participation into the activities in support of Tibetan independence, Nima's family was inflicted by death, illness and other disasters. Finally, Nima, her husband, and her mother managed to flee from Tibet and are now living in the Tibetan community in exile.

Phuntsok Zomkyi was a Buddhist nun. She was born near Lhasa. After she completed her primary school education, she worked mostly as a farmer. She became a Buddhist nun in 1988. On October 10, 1992 she participated in protests in Barkhor, Lhasa. She was soon arrested and detained at the Fourth Branch of the Gondzhe Prisons. She was locked up with other five nuns, one of whom was sentenced to nine years, another eight years, and the rest of the women, as well as Phuntsok herself, were sentenced to four years. It was later learned that 30 or 40 nuns were arrested together, and sent as a group to this prison. The prisoners were not allowed to go out, so when occasionally there were opportunities for grave-digging, they would fight among themselves, simply hoping to get out for fresh air. After her release, she went back to the Buddhist nunnery. However, under the pressure from the government, the head nun informed the Buddhist nuns that they have been relieved from their positions. Sensing little prospects of her future in Tibet, she fled to India, and is now living in the Tibetan community in exile.

Namsey Lhamo, born in Tibet in Garze County, Kham. She was arrested on June 11, 2008 because of her participation in protests in Garze. She was punched and kicked by the police during her interrogation. The police also forced her to stare at red-hot furnaces for long periods of time. Since then, her vision has become severely impaired. After being released, she fled to India. Her elder brother was also arrested. He was sentenced to three, and then seven years because of activities against the Chinese communist government in 2008. Namsey Lhamo is now living in the Tibetan community in exile.

Yangchen Lhamo was a Buddhist nun. She was arrested on March 24, 2008 when she took part in a protest in Ganzi County, Kham, Tibet. Due to the ruthless beatings and abuse she suffered in prison, she died in a hospital not close to Chengdu on December 5, 2009.

On April 21, 2009, Lhasa's Intermediate People's Court delivered harsh prison sentences to three young Tibetan women who took part in the protest against Chinese rule in Lhasa on March 14, 2008. They were charged with arson along with "causing death and injury". The woman from Sakya, Shigatse County was sentenced to death with a two year reprieve; another girl from Lhasa was sentenced to life imprisonment; and a girl by the name of Chime was sentenced to ten years in prison.

Due to the severe oppression under the authoritarian rule of the People's Republic of China, there have been 38 self-immolations by Tibetans from 2001 to 2012. Among the 38 self-immolations, 28 Tibetans have already given up their lives to the cause. Among those that sacrificed that lives, there are five women who I want to focus on today.

The first woman was called Tenzin Wangmo. She was from Ngawa, Amdo, Tibet (now Ngawa County, Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). She was a 20 year old Buddhist nun at the Mami Nunnery (now Sigui Nunnery). On October 17th, 2011 she self-immolated and gave up her life at the site. Afterwards, she was buried by those from her hometown. She was the first woman to self-immolate out of all the Tibetans.

The second woman's name was Palden Chotsoe. She was from Dawu County, Kham, Tibet (now Dawu County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). She was a 35 year old Buddhist nun at the Zakar Ganden Choling Buddhist Nunnery. On October 30th, 2011, she self-immolated and sacrificed her life. Under the strict orders of the local government, people could not immediately make any funeral preparations for her. On November 6th, more than ten thousand people attended an elaborate Buddhist ceremony held for her, and her body was cremated.

The third woman's name was Tenzin Chozom. She was from Ngawa, Amdo, Tibet (now Ngawa County, Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). She was a 19 year old Buddhist nun at the Mami Nunnery (now Sigui Nunnery). She self-immolated on February 11th, 2012. She suffered severe burns as a result of the self-immolation, and was forcibly escorted away from the site by military police. It was learned later that she died.

The fourth woman's name was Tsering Kyi. She was from Maqu County, Amdo, Tibet (now Maqu County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province). She was an eighth grader in Tibet Middle School. She was nineteen years old. She self-immolated and sacrificed her life on March 3rd, 2012, in protest of the marginalization of Tibetan language in the Tibetan educational system. Her body was snatched away by the military police at the scene. These military police officers later proclaimed that Tsering Kyi suffered from a mental illness, implying that her "mental deficiency" was the reason for the self-immolation.

The fifth woman's name was Rinchen. She was from Ngawa, Amdo, Tibet (now Ngawa County, Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). She was mother to four children and worked as a herder. She was 32 years old. She self-immolated and sacrificed her life in front of the local police station, which was next to the famous Kirti Monastery in Tibet. Local Tibetans cremated her body after her death. The above-mentioned five Tibetan women who self-immolated as a form of protest had a range of age: the oldest being 32, and the youngest being nineteen.

The GuChuSum Political Prisoners Movement of Tibet now has 600 members. 155 of those members are female political prisoners. And 92 of those female political prisoners are Buddhist nuns. Since the 1950s, Tibetan women have consistently participated in different freedom protest movements of various scale and content. They are women from all walks of life: Buddhist nuns, farmers, vendors, students, housewives, seamstresses, herders, singers, authors, and teachers. Some of them were imprisoned as long as 20 some years, and some were imprisoned a couple of months to a year. Due to

long terms of incarceration, they experienced various levels of mental and physical torture. They served their sentences in different prisons, detention centers, and forced labor camps. Many of them served their sentences located in Lhasa, the capital of Tibetan Autonomous Region. These prisons include Drapchi Prison, Guzi Prison, Fourth Prison, Chisong Forced Labor Camp, Samye Prison, Garz Prefecture Prison of Kham, Xinduqiao Farm, and Chengdu Prison.

These female prisoners faced an extreme amount of torture and physical abuse in prisons and forced labor camps. Similarly to male prisoners, female prisoners and prisoners at labor reform camps often suffered beatings by prison police with electric rods, wood sticks, and metal rods after being forcibly stripped. They also often had hot water thrown in their faces. They were also often tied up, handcuffed, and thrown into seclusion cells. They were often given meager meals, hung from rafters with heavy smoke surrounding them, then they were further punished by forced to stand under the scorching sun for a long time. During the winter, they were forced to stand on ice. These female prisoners and prisoners of labor reform camps often did not receive timely medical treatment after their abuse. They were forced to participate in excessive physical activities. As if the physical abuse was not enough, these women also encountered cruel and aggressive verbal abuse, which caused severe deterioration on the minds and hearts of these female prisoners.

As I mentioned before, a great number of female political prisoners were Buddhist nuns. Some of them suffered the worst abuse. At many of these prisons or forced labor camps, Buddhist nuns were sexually assaulted by the military police. In May of 1998, within Drapchi Prison, the first prison in Lhasa, three Buddhist nuns by the names of Chuntse Sangmo (of Peshawar Village, Lhünzhub County), Dikey Yangzom (of Dolwa Stupa, Nyemo County, Lhasa), and Khandol Yunden (of Jobu Monastery, Nyemo County) respectively suffered beating and torture by three police officers. At that time, the military police officers used their police batons as weapons of sexual assault against these women. And due to the lengthened time which these military police officers tortured and beat these women, all three of the Buddhist nuns have since passed on.

Those who are fortunate enough to survive currently reside in dispersed areas throughout the world. Some have become mothers to several children. Some have only started to live their lives again, and are educating themselves at various schools for Tibetan exiles.
