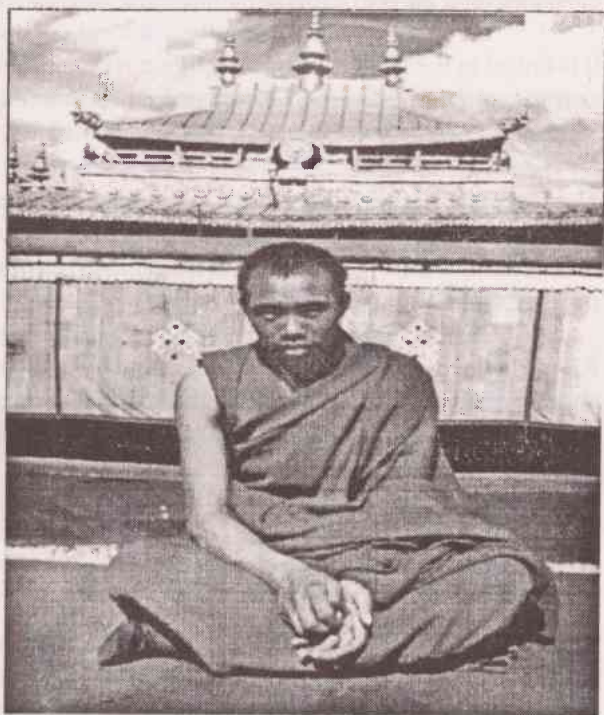


RELIGIOUS REPRESSION in TIBET



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"In Tibet in particular, religious persecution is closely linked to the suppression of political dissent. The vast majority of political prisoners known to Amnesty International in Tibet are Buddhist monks and nuns."

Amnesty International

Repression of religion in Tibet is not linked to any dislike of Buddhism by the Chinese authorities. Rather than being opposed to Buddhism, Chinese hostility against religion in Tibet stems from a fear of national unity, as religion is one of the most powerful parts of Tibetan national and cultural identity.

It is linked to the fact that Tibetan religion is connected to Tibetan identity and, by exerting religious practises, Tibetan people are asserting their cultural and national identity.

The fact that religion gives to the Dalai Lama the status of spiritual and temporal leader also makes Tibetan religion a matter to be repressed. Religious people will always follow the Dalai Lama and his policies, to which Chinese government is openly opposed.

All these factors make Tibetan Buddhism a living symbol of Tibetan nationalism and thus, in the eyes of Chinese authorities, 'disruptive and controversial.' They see Tibetan religion as a political problem and religious institutions as centres of rebellion, which must be suppressed.

RELIGIOUS REPRESSION

There is no sign of relaxation in the religious repression campaign initiated by the People's Republic of China in Tibet's religious institutions. However, China regularly claims to the international community that Tibetan people enjoy freedom of religion. In its 1998 White Paper on Human Rights in Tibet, China stated that:

"The Chinese Constitution stipulates that freedom of religious belief is one of the fundamental rights of the citizens. Chinese government respect and protect its citizens' right to freedom of religious belief."

Their law also stipulates that officials who deprive citizens of religious freedom are subjected to up to two years imprisonment. To date, no officials have been charged for this crime, despite massive violations of religious freedom. On the contrary, the Chinese government itself maintains policies and programs to suppress religious freedom of Tibetan people, such as the 'Strike hard' campaign: a state-run policy to strike hard on religious institutions.

Since the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Tibet, in 1949, over 6,000 religious institutions have been destroyed, as a result of the Chinese forces' attempt to reunite Tibet with the 'motherland'. Although some of the monasteries have been rebuilt and the monks and nuns 'permitted' to practise Buddhism, the right to religious freedom has been severely confined.

Institutions restored with Chinese assistance are usually only those accessible to tourists and well-known religious institutions. Drepung Monastery in Lhasa, for example, has a magnificently restored façade, yet the internal structures remain in ruins.

The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy continue to document widespread repression of freedom of religion in Tibet. Ever since China launched its national 'Strike Hard' campaign in Tibet's religious institutions in April 1996, there has been a systematic repression of religious freedom. Freedom of expression is completely denied to monks and nuns and hundreds of them have been expelled or arrested for defying official orders.

Religious and cultural rights are internationally recognised human rights. The incorporation of these rights into international law is a recognition that the preservation of these values is of concern to the entire world community. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and thereby represents an international standard applicable to all nations.

'PATRIOTIC RE-EDUCATION' CAMPAIGN

In April 1996, China launched the 'Strike Hard' Campaign, a 'patriotic re-education' program implemented in all religious institutions in Tibet, in an attempt to suppress 'splittist activities.'

The 'work teams', composed mainly of Public Security Bureau (PSB) officials, lead extended re-education sessions, which disrupts the monastic schedules. Their main purpose is to identify, expel and arrest monks and nuns considered 'unpatriotic', those who express any opinion contrary to Party's policy or those who don't agree with the five points required by the pledge, which all monks and nuns are forced to sign. The five points are:

1. Declare their opposition to separatism;
2. Agree to the Chinese version of Tibetan history;
3. Recognise the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama;
4. Deny Tibet's independent status;
5. Denounce the Dalai Lama as a traitor of the 'Mother land'

According to testimonies, the 'work team' does not hesitate using violence during re-education meetings as argument to 'convince' the monks and nuns of its ideas. Open disagreement often leads to arrest.

'Work team' member's visit to monasteries and nunneries continue unabated despite international scrutiny. TCHRD has recorded 11,935 expulsion, 576 arrests and closure of 18 monasteries as of August 2000.

A five-member 'work team' came to Sanglung Monastery in May 1998 to conduct 're-education' for approximately ten days. Due to the monks' refusal to obey orders of the 'work team' that involved opposition to the Dalai Lama and acceptance of Chinese Panchen Lama, 60 monks out of 305 resident monks were expelled. All the monks below the age of eighteen and those who have opposed the 'work team' members were expelled. A limit of 120 monks was imposed and permits were issued to these monks. The remaining monks were ordered to leave the monastery and sent back to their homes. Sanglung Monastery is the largest Monastery in Dzamthang County.

In July 1999, during the re-evaluation of the 're-education' campaign in Nyemo County, the 'work team' officers expelled four nuns from Terdhak Nunnery. All the expelled nuns now live with their parents and relatives and are prohibited from joining any other nunnery or performing any religious rites. Following their

expulsion, the township authority placed them under three years of political scrutiny and twice every month, the nuns are to report to the township PSB officials.

Dolma Lhaxhang Monastery is located close to Nyizong Monastery in Sersshul County in Kandze 'TAP'. Eight officials of Sersshul County visited Nyizong Monastery in August 1998 to order their closure. In the ensuing resistance and resentment by the monks, six monks were arrested from the monastery and identified as the principle 'culprit'. All 206 monks were later expelled and ordered to return to their homes. At present, both the monasteries remain closed.

On 1 May 2000, a 30-member 'work team' from Chamdo Religious Department visited Thenthok Monastery in Dzogang County, Chamdo 'TAP' to launch 'patriotic re-education'. During the campaign, the officials ordered the monastery to remove all pictures of the Dalai Lama. Three monks of the monastery were severely beaten with one sustaining broken ribs. Tashi Rabten, the treasurer of Thenthok Monastery died under suspicious circumstances during the visit of the 'work team' officials. In addition, five monks were arrested and 20 lay people detained.

In the first half of 2000, two deaths were reported in connection with the 're-education' of 'work team' in different monasteries and nunneries. In the year 1997, deaths of 14 monks as a direct result of the 'patriotic re-education' campaign were reported. The causes of death were said to be severe pressure from the 'work team' officials and torture in detention. Tashi Rabten, the treasurer of Thenthok Monastery was discovered lying on the ground floor in a critical condition by fellow monks after the 'work team' officials forcefully led him to the third floor to look for Dalai Lama photographs.

In September 1997, China announced that 'work teams' conducting 'patriotic re-education' campaign had covered 1,780 of Tibet's 1,787 monasteries and temples, and 30,000 of 46,000 monks and nuns had received re-education. With nearly all of the religious institutions under 're-education programs, in November, the campaign was extended even to the lay sectors.

TOTAL CONTROL OVER RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Since the commencement of the 'Patriotic re-education' campaign, Chinese 'work-team' officials continue to exercise total control over all the religious activities in monasteries and nunneries. The intention of the campaign is to take control of Tibet's religion by controlling the minds of Tibetan religious people.

In June 1994, the Third National Forum on Work in Tibet issued a call for stricter control over the monastic institutions. This was achieved through control of the 'Democratic Management Committees', supposedly elected organs installed within each monastery, to replace the traditional authority of abbots and lamas. The state authorities gave these committees responsibility over monastic admission rules, the areas of curriculum, and discipline within the monasteries and nunneries.

Today, the monasteries and nunneries are controlled by Chinese 'work team', dispatched to investigate dissent and to conduct 're-education sessions'. Hundreds of monks and nuns have been arrested for political activities, which include the act of possessing pictures of the Dalai Lama, their spiritual leader. Many others have been expelled from their monasteries and nunneries.

Political education sessions are lengthy and constitute a major intrusion on the nuns' and monks' study of Buddhist texts. Furthermore, the traditional practise of monks and nuns reading scriptures in Tibetan homes has been abolished, and permission must be sought before certain teachings may be given. The government controls what and where religious ceremonies can be performed. The picture of the Dalai Lama, which had already been banned from religious institutions, is now forbidden even in private houses.

Many monks and nuns were automatically removed from religious institutions with the official ceiling introduced by the 'work team' members. The restriction limits the number of monks and nuns who can remain in their institutions. Additionally, Chinese officials have enforced an age limit and issued orders to expel monks and nuns below the age of 18 and above the age of 50. This age limit further denies the rights of monks and nuns to study and practise their religion. The forcible retirement of monks and nuns above the age of 50 threat-

ens the survival of Tibetan Buddhist tradition as senior religious people play a pivotal role in the transmission of religious teachings.

The defection of the 17th Karmapa amidst tight Chinese security in December 1999 is the highest profile spiritual leader to escape from Tibet since the Dalai Lama's departure in 1959 and 49 year-old Agya Rinpoche in 1998. After the initial commotion subsided, the Karmapa, in his most political speech asserted the threat of Tibetan religious traditions and culture facing total extinction.

Chinese authorities have launched a series of campaigns in the year 2000, designed specifically to purge the influence of religious belief amongst the Tibetan people, more particularly of Tibetan cadres and government workers. Lhasa City Discipline Inspection Commission during its sixth general body meeting held from 15 to 17 March 2000, forbids people from developing devotional faith, considering the Dalai Lama as an enlightened being, sending to schools run by the Dalai Lama, and pursuing the path of the Dalai clique. It further stresses that those violating the statutory law shall be subjected to severe punishments following strict investigation.

In June 2000, during extensive raids conducted in Tibetan houses in Lhasa, the Chinese officials forcefully seized religious belongings including altar, thangka-painting, statues and other religious articles, which were finally disposed off in the nearby Kyichu River. Approximately, 450 Tibetans were fined 500 yuan each for having displayed the Dalai Lama's picture in their homes. Forcible seizure of the pictures of the Dalai Lama took place in as many as ten townships in Toelung Dechen County. Two students were reportedly suspended from their schools for having offered prayers.

A week before the birthday of His Holiness, Chinese authorities distributed leaflets prohibiting Tibetans to celebrate the occasion. The custom of celebrating the birthday is viewed as propagating acts of splittist and instigating masses to oppose the Chinese government. During the month of *Saka Dawa*, the fourth holy month of Tibetan calendar, vigilance was intensified in the *Lingkor* (circumambulation) area in Lhasa. Moreover, an official order that compelled mass withdrawal of juvenile monks and nuns of Tibetan cadres and government workers from religious institution have been reported in various counties under Lhasa City.

During the third meeting of the seventh Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference held on 10 May 2000, one of the members Dongbu Tsering Dorjee stated, " To achieve obliteration of religious faith that is manifested in our sensibility and mannerism is an important responsibility."

With the rights and freedoms of individual Tibetans being curbed and stringent laws enforced, Tibetans in Tibet are reeling under repressive communist policies that might eventually lead to total annihilation of Buddhist culture and religion.

DENIAL OF RIGHT TO PRACTISE RELIGION IN PRISON

For a political prisoner, imprisonment is not only about punishment, but also about subduing the prisoner's sense of identity as Tibetans. With this aim, in addition to all the ideological training that prisoners are obliged to go through, they are also forbidden to practise their religion, and are often forced to denounce the Dalai Lama, their political and spiritual leader.

While Tibetan's right to practise their religion is curtailed in their everyday lives, in Chinese prisons there is a complete prohibition of all basic religious practises. Monks and nuns in prison are prohibited to prostrate, make beads out of dough or wearing robes. Rather, they are obliged to let their hair grow. The mere act of praying aloud is forbidden, and punishment for breaking this 'rule of silence' includes physical and verbal abuse. Gyaltzen Pelsang, a nun who was arrested at the age of 13, commented: "If we ever recite mantras or anything like that we would be immediately beaten".

Religion is one of the most powerful expressions of Tibetan culture, and the practise of religion is very important to Tibetan prisoners, many of whom are nuns and monks.