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DEFIANT TIBETAN WOMEN

Tshering Doma

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology, Nakshalbari College

Naxalbari, Budhakaran, West Bengal, India

Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to explain how the Tibetan Women Association (TWA) over a period of time has served and continues to serve as “women voice” for Tibetan women living not only in Tibet but outside Tibet as well. Tibetan Women Association was founded on the March 12, 1959 in Tibet. On this day known as women’s uprising day, thousands of Tibetan women in Lhasa gathered together to protest against the illegal occupation of Tibet by Communist China. Protesting peacefully outside the Potala Palace, hundreds of these women suffered brutally at the hands of the Chinese troops. They were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and beaten without trial. The spirit and resilience and conviction of that resistance have continued to this day and Tibetan women are at the forefront of this peaceful non-violent movement. Further a brief narrative of few Tibetan women such as Ama Adhe (political prisoner) and Noryon Dewang (Tibetan patriot, activist and community leader) struggles can be seen as voices and inspiration, not only for the Tibetan cause, but for all people that believe in the righteousness of peace, freedom, and justice.

Keywords: Tibetan Women, Protest, Association, Prisoners, Movement.

Introduction

In this paper an attempt has been made to look at the active participation of Tibetan women in the political social and economic domain with main emphasis on the Tibetan Women Association (TWA) over a period of time and how this association has served as “women voice” for Tibetan women living not only in Tibet but outside Tibet as well. The Tibetan Women’s Association (TWA) was originally founded on March 12, 1959 in Tibet. On this day, known as Women’s Uprising Day thousands of Tibetan women in Lhasa gathered together to protest against the illegal occupation of Tibet by Communist China. Protesting peacefully outside the Potala Palace, hundreds of these women suffered brutally at the hands of the Chinese troops. They were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and beaten without trial. Hundreds of Tibetan women who took part in the uprising sacrificed their lives and faced many executions from the Chinese government during the Cultural Revolution. The 12th March uprising day is remembered not only by the Tibetan women but is also considered a historic day in Tibetan history. 1959 was a critical year in determining whether Tibet would survive as an independent nation. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Tibetan women showed a deep sense of patriotism and unwavering courage, which ultimately led to their organized struggle for freedom. The movement was initiated and led by brave women such as Kunsang, Galing Shar Choe-la, Pekong Penpa Dolma.¹ For those remaining in occupied Tibet, the struggle continued, often with dire consequences. Women, in time of crisis, have stepped forward and assumed the mantle of political leadership. Nun Thinley Choedon from Nyemo region in Tibet emerged as a renowned guerrilla leader in the large-scale rebellion, she led a group of Tibetan freedom fighters in the 1960s and fought fierce battles with the Chinese. Her fame spread even in the prisons at the time where the inmate Douche Konchog Tenaha composed an unprecedented praise for her, saying; “you, Thinley Choedon, who risked her life to defend the faith are the supreme heroine in the defence of the faith. All Tibetans behold you as an example to be emulated. We shall remember you forever.”²

A period of transition for Tibetan Women Association followed this uprising when many Tibetan women were forced to flee Tibet to live in exile in India. From 1959 to 1984 many Tibetan women’s groups were established in India, such as in Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Dharamsala, and Rajpur. Some of these groups-initiated handicraft centers for women in their localities. These handicraft centers helped not only to preserve the arts and crafts of Tibet, but also imparted skills to Tibetan women so that they can earn their livelihood during the early refugee life. On the 10th of September 1984, with the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Women’s Association was officially reinstated with 12 branches throughout India. Today, the TWA has over 16,000 members and 57 branches worldwide including branches in: India, Nepal, Europe, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, the United States of America and Canada. TWA sees itself as the natural continuation of our many brave sisters who sacrificed their lives for the freedom and protection of Tibet.³ TWA’s main objective is to raise public awareness of the abuses faced by Tibetan women in Chinese-occupied Tibet. Through extensive publicity and involvement in national and international affairs, TWA alerts communities to the gender-specific human rights abuses committed against Tibetan women in the form of forced birth control policies such as sterilizations and abortions, and

¹<https://tibetanwomen.org/history/>

² Breaking the Shackles: 50 Years of Tibetan Women’s Struggle, TWA Publications, Dharamsala, 2009, pp- xiv.

³<https://tibetanwomen.org/aims-objectives/>



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restrictions on religious, political, social and cultural freedoms. In exile, TWA places great priority on the contributions of Tibetan women towards the preservation and promotion of the distinct religion, culture and identity of the Tibetan people. TWA serves the Tibetan community as a whole with activities addressing religious and cultural issues, educational needs, social welfare, the environment and the political participation and social empowerment of women. To best achieve its goals, TWA functions as a democratic organization.⁴

On the other hand, the aims of the Tibetan Women’s Association is to raise global awareness of the critical situation inside Tibet, and to exert international pressure for the improvement of human rights for Tibetans living in occupied Tibet. To promote the social, political, and economic equality of Tibetan women, in Tibet and in Tibetan exile communities. To address the drastic human rights abuses committed against Tibetan women in Tibet including rape, physical violence, and the denial of fundamental reproductive, religious, and political freedoms and to address other cases of gender-based discrimination in the Tibetan exile communities. To ensure Tibetan women have access to adequate educational information about health care, child care and family planning. To assist the needy in the Tibetan community through sponsorship programs that help to support economically disadvantaged families, single parents, children, nuns, the handicapped, the sick, and the elderly. To preserve and promote Tibetan culture, language, tradition, and the arts through community education, literacy and publications. There has been a great impact of this association on the Tibetan community at large. Raising awareness of the harmful policies affecting Tibet’s environment, as part of the Tibet. Maintaining an international presence, to advocate for the rights of women in and outside of Tibet on a global stage. Rigorously campaigning for issues and injustice affecting the lives of women within the exile community and inside Tibet. Producing regular research and media in order to support international advocacy and campaigning work.⁵

TWA calls on the Chinese government to stop these arbitrary arrests of the innocent. The human rights situation inside Tibet is continuously deteriorating; the Chinese government is not only exploiting the political and religious rights of Tibetan people, but also destroying the fragile environment on the Tibetan plateau. The Chinese government has been executing strategic measures to Sinicize and alienate Tibetan people and culture. Tibetans continue to engage in peaceful and cultural forms of resistance and have openly and defiantly expressed their reverence and faith in His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Tibetans in exile have been carrying the struggle forward, amplifying the voices of Tibetans inside and making sure that the sacrifice of the Tibetan martyrs including the self-immolators doesn’t go in vain. The protections of Tibetan identify, language, religion and culture remain at the forefront of this political struggle.

On the other hand, voices of Tibetan women can be looked at through brief narratives of women political prisoners such as Ama Adhe who had spent just over a one third of her life in prison. The seventy-nine-year-old had spent 27 years in captivity for her part in protests against the Chinese invasion of Tibet. She released a book about her harrowing ordeal titled ‘The Voice that Remembers: The Heroic Story of a Woman’s Fight to Free Tibet’, and describes the experience as being ‘worse than hell’. Born in Ghortsa village, Nyarong, Kham, Adhe was a wife and mother before her husband passed away at the young age of 26 in 1958. She describes her husband as a ‘kind of troublemaker’ for their Chinese oppressors and believes he was poisoned. Soon after this tragedy, her sister was arrested by Chinese authorities before being publicly humiliated and executed in a public square to set an example. Several months after, she was arrested alongside 300 other women for protesting, she describes the period as the ‘worst time’ in the country. Of all the prisoners taken, only four survived the ordeal, 296 died in captivity. She describes the torment suffered: “I was taken to eight different prisons in Tibet and China during my period of imprisonment. The most difficult time was the first three years in Inganse prison. We weren’t given any food, just crushed corn in lots of water. A lot of people died from starvation. We were so hungry”. When she was finally released, the world had changed, this was not the Tibet she had lived and loved. Her son had died and her daughter was a stranger, however the two eventually bonded but Adhe admitted initially feeling closer to her fellow prisoners. Two years after her release in 1987, she fled to Nepal before reaching Dharamsala, India the year after, where she had remained ever since and passed away recently. Adhe’s story is one of great determination and strength, however many others in her position are not as fortunate.⁶

The memoir of Noryon Dewang, Tibetan patriot, activist and community leader, illustrates the amazing courage and strength of the first generation of Tibetan women to reach exile. Born in 1921, Noryon Dewang was detained by the Chinese during the 1959 invasion, and subsequently escaped into exile. Like many others at the time, she assumed not only responsibility over her family and household, but emerged as a community organizer and political figure. Integral to the re-establishment of TWA in exile, Noryon

⁴ <https://tibetanwomen.org/aims-objectives/>

⁵ <https://tibetanwomen.org/aims-objectives/>

⁶ <https://tibetanwomen.org/50-anniversary-books/>



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Dewang initiated the Kar-dor Women's Friendship Association, which was to eventually emerge in 1984 as the fully functioning TWA. She was a pivotal force in the establishment of several vocational co-operatives, and served for many years as the director of the pioneering Rajpur Handicraft Center. Noryon Dewang's life is just one example of the integral role played by Tibetan women in laying the foundations of society in exile, ensuring the continuation of culture and family, and serving as leaders of both the community and in politics⁷.

Taking note of the role of the Tibetan women association and the brief narratives of Tibetan women such as Ama Adhe with their compelling account of women struggle one can say that women irrespective of which society they belong to have played an important role and continue to be dominant forces for change in their society. For women inside and outside Tibet, their goal is singular to nurture the future generations and to inculcate in them the knowledge of their cultural heritage, spiritual wisdom and strength of character. Tibetan women continue to share the wisdom and fortitude that bridge their worlds, ancient and contemporary. Their stories are a celebration of the female spirit.

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4. <https://tchrd.org/>
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