

"If I have to die on the way, then so be it". Crossing the border.

The following is an account of how a young Tibetan woman clandestinely trekked across the border between Tibet and Nepal to go to India. Then aged 16, she took the decision to leave her region of origin in Qinghai in northeast Tibet (traditionally known to Tibetans as Amdo) on her own, with the idea of meeting the Dalai Lama and to get a more genuinely Tibetan education among Tibetan refugees in India than she could expect at home. This abridged interview provides an insight into the determination and hopes that each year bring hundreds of Tibetans with no chance to get official travel documents to undertake the same endeavour.

You said you came from your home in Amdo on your own?

Yes, I left school and instead of going back home I went to Lhasa with the idea of continuing my journey across the border to India. When I left, I sent a 14-page letter to my parents in order to make them understand why I was leaving. Then when I reached Lhasa I spoke with my father on the phone. He was crying a lot but he finally accepted my decision and he even sent me some money.

How did you find a guide to help you cross the border?

I was in Lhasa for 20 days. I asked a person from Amdo and she called him. The guide came to the front of the place where I was staying and we met there, outside. He was wearing something over his face and he obviously didn't tell me his real name. I understand that he is now in prison. He asked whether I was really determined to go to India. I said I was. I paid him 1500 Yuan. And then he told me to prepare enough food for the way; walking shoes, blankets, an umbrella and these sorts of things. I prepared a bag with all these things, and I also took my notebook in which I had written a lot of poems about Tibet, myself, my hopes etc.

Did the guide tell you when you'd go?

He didn't, he just said I would be told at short notice. He was very brief and disappeared as fast as he had arrived. I just had to rely on him.

Did you not feel uncomfortable relying on somebody you did not even know?

I did, but I had no other choice. I had a bad experience shortly before that. There are bad people in Lhasa who do business with women, you know. Through a family acquaintance, I was once invited to a party with Phagpala Geleg Namgyal [Chairman of TAR CPPCC]. I thought: "He is a lama and must be wearing monk's clothes". I had never seen him before, but I was told he was a kind of representative of the Panchen Lama's after his death. But then I was very surprised to see that it was not how I imagined - really strange. There were a lot of young Chinese and Tibetan girls around him. I did not have the feeling of being amongst 'higher' people. They gave me food and Coca Cola and sat me just near to Phagpala Geleg Namgyal. The businessman who knew my family told me that Phagpala was attracted to me and tried hard to convince me to sleep with him. I got very, very angry. I was speaking in Amdo dialect, and I thought that Phagpala Geleg Namgyal couldn't understand. I said many bad words to the businessman and I threw the Coca Cola in his face. I told him my family knew him and I would tell them and then they would kill him. I also asked Phagpala Geleg Namgyal how a person in the highest position in the Chinese Government could still do this to young Tibetan girls who have no home. Actually, when I realised the situation, I was very scared. I had never been in such a situation before. But then I heard Phagpala Geleg Namgyal saying: "Just leave her", so the businessman took me outside, and he acted shy now. He apologised and told me not to tell anyone about that. He offered me money, but I threw it at his face and left. So after such an experience with someone I thought I knew, of course I was insecure with the guide. But what could I do except trust him?

Do you think the guide was working solely for money?

Certainly not just... Some of our group had no money left soon after we had arrived in Nepal and he even helped them. He told me that as I was the youngest in this group and a girl, I'd need some money for school in India, so he only took half my money from me. I also noticed that he was very knowledgeable and concerned about Tibet.

And then the guide finally called you?

Yes. One day, he let me know I had to join the group at a certain place that evening, a kind of shop, and we would leave the next morning. So I went there. I didn't know anyone and we were not introduced for security reasons. There were 17 of us, and the guide divided us into small groups. The next morning, very early, we left for Shigatse with a bus.

What were you thinking when you left?

I was sad and happy. Two friends had come with me from Amdo, but they had no money, so they couldn't join us this time. The night before I left, we talked a lot and they cried the whole night; we did not sleep much. So when I left I felt sad, of course. But when we reached Shigatse I was just excited that I'd see His Holiness the Dalai Lama soon.

What happened in Shigatse?

We arrived in the afternoon and stayed together in a small hotel. We went to pray at the monastery. We stayed for one night and the next evening, when it got dark, the guide told us to go discreetly, one by one, out of the town and hide at a certain place. After we got there, it got dark and we waited for one or two hours, then one big van picked us all up.

At some point in the middle of the night, the driver said there was a police check post ahead and we'd have to walk. So we went up a mountain and the car went on empty. It passed the check-post and then waited for us on the other side of the mountain. It was already morning. We then continued the journey in the van and finally reached a town close to the border. We hid the whole day and I was very thirsty. This time the guide didn't allow us to move around. We waited until it became dark and then we started to walk across the Himalayas.

Can you describe details of the trek across the mountains?

It was a really, really difficult experience. I had never walked for that long without proper food and water before. I became sick and could not walk very well and if I'd stop walking I would fall asleep. At that altitude, I could not get enough air, so I felt giddy and started vomiting. Particularly at the beginning of the trek, we would often rest at daytime and walk overnight in order not to be discovered. We could see a lot of Chinese police cars patrolling on the roads from afar. But even then we'd only walk for a few hours.

How long did it take to cross the Himalayas?

I'm not exactly sure, but longer than one week. When I saw how much snow there was to cross, I thought maybe there's another way. The guide kept on telling us that tomorrow we would arrive, but it seemed we'd never arrive, we'd cross mountain after mountain and he would say it's after the next mountain but it never was, it never finished. I really hated the guide when he talked like that. But he was nice really.

Did people talk during the journey?

Oh! I talked too much on the first two or three days! No good things, just rubbish: "I miss Mum"; "I miss school". I did like my school you know. I talked about how I came from Amdo, about all the things I'd do once I reached India. I had a very big mouth. But then after three or four days my mood and energy went down. Then if they just spoke to me, I would get angry and start crying. Everybody was surprised about that, and they made jokes about my behaviour. But then they also got really worried about me because I also got slower and slower, always behind.

What about food?

I had these Chinese instant noodles, but after a while the smell of the noodles would make me sick! Fortunately other people had butter, cheese and tsampa [(roasted barley flour, the Tibetan staple food)]. Some people also brought dried meat. But it would happen that we didn't get anything to eat for one or two days. At some point also, we could not carry much water anymore because it was too much of a load.

One day we came in a sandy tract and we didn't get any water for a whole day and I thought that we were all going to die. But we finally found water. It did not look clean, but we didn't care, we just drank as much as we could.

Apart from that, what was the most difficult part of the journey?

Rain! Everything gets wet, and we'd still have to walk through the mountains. With little food and water you are already very weak and cannot walk properly. It was really hard and I thought hard about why I chose this way. But I wouldn't want to go back either.

You never thought of going back?

I never thought of going back. I had decided that I had to go to India. That kept me going.

What about morale generally?

The saddest moment was when a boy among us decided to turn back alone, which of course was very dangerous. I think he was 21, and physically he was actually quite strong, but he grew up in town and looked like a Chinese. I think he didn't really want to come along; it was his mother who had sent him. But on the way he found out he was not willing to take such hardship and so he left. It's all about determination. If someone makes a decision and has the will to go to India, then they will do anything.

People let him go? They didn't try to stop him?

Nobody stopped him. He could not walk and was far behind everybody else. Waiting for him was a burden for the group but they also knew his chances of making it back on his own were small. So everybody was very sad but they wouldn't say a word. Of course, I cared about him too. I cried when he went away.

We never heard anything about him after that. We don't know whether he is alive or not. Those times, I really believed in ghosts and I used to think that if you went in the wilderness alone like that then you might meet a ghost, and that was really scary. We Tibetans have a lot of stories about these things.

There was some idea that I might go back with him. I was starting to feel really weak around that time, so the guide told me that I had better go back with him otherwise I might die on the way, but I refused even the idea. I said that if I had to die on the way, then so be it. After that the monk and the guide took really good care of me. They would not let me cross a river alone, they carried me over the snow. They would always bring me food. All the people were very nice to me. If I was walking far behind they would cook and food would be waiting for me. But that's how another sad thing happened to me. One day, it had got dark already, and they hadn't got wood for the fire so they took paper that they had found in my bag. When I reached there I realised they had taken my notebook with all my poems...

I cried all night! They felt very sorry and tried to comfort me, saying they'd buy nice new books for me in Nepal. They did not really realise that they couldn't bring back my writing.

But the most terrible episode happened one evening high in the mountains. We had discovered a small stone house, and wanted to spend the night there, but there was a lot of snow inside so we had to clear it first. Some of us took flat stones and started shovelling the snow away. Suddenly one of them found something hard in the snow and we saw these were human feet. This was the frozen dead body of a child who had died on the way; either of cold or exhaustion and his group had left his corpse here. We simply couldn't sleep in the house. Later we discovered another child's body down a slope near the house.

Were there any nice moments on the trip?

Yes, once we were kind of trapped at night on a slope. Down in the valley was a Chinese army camp. We could hear their dogs barking and see the flashes of the lights that they'd throw on the mountain to scare us. It was very close to the border and they knew there was a path towards it over here.

Anyway, it was full moon day and you could see anything move. The ground was made of pebbles that would roll away under your feet. The path was extremely narrow and a wrong step would set hundreds of pebbles moving, making a lot of noise that would echo in the mountains and point to us. Even from far away, we would have made an easy target. We were totally helpless and really afraid. Then we just started praying. Everybody prayed and, after a time, thick clouds came up and it became completely dark. So we could cross safely. We really believed that the clouds had been sent to protect us. We have these kinds of beliefs you know.

I had never seen the Dalai Lama in real life but we did have pictures of him. When we were in trouble on the way, when it got too hard, I would imagine he was in front of me and I would talk to him. I talked to him a lot in my thoughts. And I really felt that he knew exactly what I was saying to him.

And then you finally reached Nepal?

Yes. At some point, the guide said we had just passed the border but I could not see any difference. People looked the same as Tibetans and wore the same kind of clothes, though I could not understand what they were saying. Inside their houses it looked exactly the same as in Tibetan houses. They were really friendly and sympathetic to us; they knew exactly where we came from and what we had come through. But anyway, at the beginning we crossed villages only at night because we knew the Nepalese police might catch us or rob us.

What did you know about Nepal at that point?

I had only heard that Songtsen Gampo [the Tibetan King said to have brought Buddhism to Tibet] married a Nepalese girl. Otherwise, I did not have a clue about Nepal.

The police did catch you though, didn't they?

Yes, they caught us at dusk in a small restaurant. The guide must have been suspicious because he was not around. The police took us and we were held in detention for four days. We knew that this is particularly dangerous for girls, so we said we were married.

How did they behave towards you?

In our case, they were actually quite nice, particularly to the women. They gave us food etc. They were not so nice to the men. But we were still very afraid that they would take us back to the Chinese. Also, we were still extremely exhausted, so we'd lie there and just guess about our fate. Some of us said that if they took us back, we'd cross the border again, but others said that once was enough and they would not make a second attempt.

Then a lady from the Tibetan Reception Centre in Kathmandu arrived. She was wearing a chuba [(women's formal Tibetan dress)] and spoke with a Lhasa dialect. We did not understand exactly what was happening, but we knew we were safe then.

And then they brought you to Kathmandu?

Yes, actually we thought we were already in India! You know we never checked maps; we had no idea about these things. But at the reception centre they told us we were not in India but would go there by bus after a while. They gave us clothes and food, took our photos for papers etc. They showed us a video of a speech by the Dalai Lama, which made me and the others cry because, so far, I had only ever seen him in pictures. I had never heard the sound of his voice.

How long were you in Nepal?

One month, but our movements were still restricted because at that time some Nepali police would catch Tibetans and put them in jail or take them back to the Chinese. Still, we were able to meet our guide again. He took us for dinner and we paid him. But, as I mentioned before, he refused to take money from me. He said I'd need my money to study in India.

Then you finally moved on to India?

Yes, they put us in a bus to Delhi and then another one to Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama lives. We arrived there in the early morning. It was good weather. I was very surprised at how small the place is. I had imagined it was a big place. I met a man from Amdo who was a teacher at home, but here he was selling food on the street. I felt very sad and kind of confused.

Anyway, we went to see the Dalai Lama. It was an audience for 30 or 40 of us. Everybody was crying, and so was I. He spoke in the Lhasa dialect so I only understood his greeting words really, but I felt like I understood each and every word. I couldn't look up to his face in that moment; I was just feeling his blessing.

Back at home I did not believe much in lamas. There are too many small lamas. My mother and sisters would always go to such lamas when they were sick instead of taking medicine. I found that ridiculous. But this time it was different, and at this moment I really believed in religion. After that, I was crying all day long and could not eat. It appeared so unreal. I couldn't believe whether it was true or not that I was really here and that I had met him.

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Website: www.tibetinfonet.net
Phone: +44 (0) 20 300 206 33
Fax: +49 (0) 2238 9494466
Email: tin@tibetinfonet.net