

The Bounty Of March
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The Tibetan activist outlines his people's crucial history of hope in the half century since the March Uprising

As a schoolboy in Class vii, my first serious Tibetan history lesson was one of provocation. I used to listen to Professor Samdhong Rinpoche's Tibetan history lectures on audio tapes sent by a scholar uncle in Varanasi. In one anecdote, Professor Rinpoche tells of the 1950 fall of the eastern gate of Kham-Chamdo to invading Chinese troops. A messenger in Lhasa ran to deliver the Morse code alert to the Tibetan Cabinet. As he stood gasping for air at the door to an official hall, the doorkeeper blocked his entry, stating that this news would disturb the aristocrats' party within.

In March 2008, protests swept across the entire Tibetan Plateau in a people's movement that was reminiscent of the Lhasa uprising of March 1959. The international media descended last year on His Holiness the Dalai Lama's exile residence in Dharamsala to ask him, "Do you support this riot? Can you stop it?" His Holiness replied: "No, I can't. I have no magic power." He was right. He had expressed a similar powerlessness back then in 1959 when the occupying People's Liberation Army ordered him to control the rebels.

Tibet's unofficial resistance movement began with monks, nomads and farmers taking up arms when China first invaded Tibet in 1949. Tibetan soldiers later organised themselves with the CIA and the Indian Government's help. And in exile, they fought for India: in 1962 against China, in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war, and in 1975 against Pakistan. When US President Nixon befriended Mao Zedong in 1972, the CIA dumped the Tibetans, and when the Nepalese army threatened to flush out Tibetan camps, the Dalai Lama ordered an end to violent resistance with the camps' disbandment. Today, 6,000 Tibetan soldiers serve the Indian army in its declassified Sector 22, a paramilitary force posted mainly on the Siachen Glacier.

In 1951, the Lhasa Government did officially protest Beijing's imposition of the 17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, but then tried to live with newly-Communist China in an arrangement of autonomy; by 1959, citizens rebelled against Chinese bullying and arrogance. The otherwise apolitical farmers and nomads rapidly spread the word: "The Chinese military plans to kidnap His Holiness Kundun. We must protect him." The next morning, people gathered in unprecedented numbers and made history. In Lhasa, the anxious crowds gathered in front of the Dalai Lama's summer palace, shouting slogans and begging their leader not to leave his abode. When government officials from inside the Norbulingka walls requested the crowd to disperse, war cries arose of "China, get out of Tibet!" The protective gathering lasted for many days and the mounting tension between PLA soldiers and Tibetans resulted in the Dalai Lama escaping to India.

Thousands of Tibetans were massacred in the following days and months.

This public awakening is honoured in exile every March 10 as Tibetan National Uprising Day, and continues to inspire new generations of Tibetans. The spontaneous protests in Lhasa in 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1993 have all been resurgences of this public indignation. During the last half century, Tibetans have repeatedly proved that the real issue of Tibet is not the status of the country's high-profile leader, but the wishes of the citizens themselves, sometimes even overriding official statements and agreements.

The protestors of the 2008 uprising knew they, too, would suffer loss of life, incarceration and torture. Yet shepherds born under Mao who had never seen the Tibetan flag photocopied the design from a book smuggled into Tibet and flew it gaily in the air. A friend's uncle, a nomad from a remote mountain region in Amdo, reported on the phone that since there were no Chinese in the mountains, he was running about with other nomads searching for them. The group hoped to raise our fists and shout in their faces: Chinese Go Home!

The 2008 uprising happened in the wake of the failing dialogue process between Dharamsala and Beijing. It historically signifies Tibetans' rejection of Beijing's bribes of material comforts and individual security. They repudiated Beijing's lofty claims of development and its gifts like modern schools, hospitals, highways, shopping malls, discotheques and the much-admired railway linking Lhasa and Beijing. The Chinese Government described the people's uprising as a disturbance instigated by the Dalai Clique, thereby belittling the Tibetan nation's aspirations and insulting the intelligence of the six million Tibetans inside Tibet. This is symptomatic of colonial powers that treat colonies as treasure islands and their citizens as exotic beasts on leashes.

In 2002, after the resumption of dialogue with the Beijing leadership, the Dalai Lama's envoys were scolded by their Chinese counterparts for masterminding anti-Beijing protests within the international community, including the pro-independence activities of the Tibetan Youth Congress. The envoys replied that, as a democracy, the Dalai Lama can't dictate terms to his people as the Beijing does in its own country. Upon the promise of further dialogue, and a possible give-and-take solution in the future, the exile government requested Tibetans not to stage protests during visits by Chinese presidents and prime ministers of foreign countries.

But many of us have utterly no trust in the corrupt Communist leadership and continue to protest. The exile government created such high hopes for dialogue that some of us rebels have even been tagged as anti-Dalai Lama by our community. By keeping our political stand steadfast through this criticism, we appreciate only too well that China itself lacks the will to negotiate, using the charade of promised talks simply to fend off Western criticism of their appalling human rights record. Today, the Dalai Lama himself is saying that he is losing hope in Beijing.

Beijing is not confident enough to invite the Dalai Lama to Tibet or China and has repeatedly rejected his autonomy proposal. Most Tibetan youth believe they can regain their identity and dignity of life through independence, and that without independence Tibet will die under the Chinese weight. Tomorrow, even if autonomy is granted, our struggle for Independence will continue in Tibet. The Tibetan people's struggle to re-establish their lost independence is,

therefore, not a secessionist movement the difference is more philosophical than ideological.

Following the non-confrontational Buddhist methods of conflict resolution, His Holiness has repeatedly tried to stop the Tibetan youth from sitting on hunger strikes, marching to Tibet, and requested Tibetans inside Tibet to restrain from mass street protests as they would result in loss of life. What, perhaps, remains misunderstood is that even though Tibetan youngsters take aggressive and confrontational actions, our common credo remains Nonviolence.

The Dalai Lama has gone out of his way in introducing and successfully nurturing a vibrant democracy-in-action in the exile Tibetan community. We will bring this gift to Tibet when independence is achieved. With such strong democratic safeguards now enshrined in our exile community, how can the Chinese Government expect to continue with its childish propaganda that the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet would re-establish serfdom and feudalism?

In 1997, having read my Shakespeare and AK Ramanujan I graduated from Loyola College, Madras and went to Tibet to start a revolution. This romantic rebel soon got arrested, beaten and thrown into jail in Lhasa. A fellow-prisoner advised me: Do not let the smoke out even if Free Tibet burns in your heart. But by then this inexperienced prisoner, a Bhagat Singh fan, had already boasted he had come to free Tibet. For both Tibetans inside and outside our land, the undeclared common strategy of the movement is to live through this difficult struggle with patience, and outlive the dictatorial Chinese leadership to witness changes in China for ourselves.

His Holiness has now called for people-to-people contact between Tibetans and the Chinese. Our future leaders may not be as brilliant, dynamic or unifying as the 14th Dalai Lama, but Tibet will have passed successfully through one of the most difficult periods in its long history.

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silence in Tibet was no sign of compromise, the 2008 people's uprising in Tibet proved that freedom is the destiny of the land of snow. 2009 will see more unrest and public expression of outrage against corruption and demand for freedom, democracy, free press and labour rights in China. Freedom is coming to China.