

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #43 – Nangpa Kyipa  
June 25, 2007

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #43
2. Interviewee: Nangpa Kyipa
3. Age: 86
4. Date of Birth: 1921
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Phari Khambu
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 25, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Home for the Aged and Disabled, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 47 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Nangpa Kyipa grew up near Phari in a place where abundant hot springs cured illnesses. Her family members were farmers and there was plenty of food to eat. With hundreds of cattle, they had enough butter and cheese to trade in nearby Bhutan for bags of rice.

Nangpa Kyipa recalls the Chinese telling the villagers that they would eradicate poverty by taking from the rich and giving it to the poor. She was told to give away half of her possessions. Her husband and brother were imprisoned by the Chinese. They were educated and the people from the village looked up to them so they were falsely accused of having ill-treated the villagers. Both were subjected to hard labor and many prisoners died from starvation. Nangpa Kyipa's husband was fortunate enough to escape, but her brother remained imprisoned for years.

Nangpa Kyipa then recounts her early days in Bylakuppe, India, and how they built the settlement to its present status. About Tibet, she says, "I can see the snow capped mountains. It's okay to even die on the mountain pass if I could see Tibet from there. My heart will feel that I am in Tibet."

### **Topics Discussed:**

Trade, life under Chinese rule, Chinese oppression, early life in Bylakuppe, life as a refugee in India.

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## Interview #43

**Interviewee: Nangpa Kyipa**

**Age: 86, Sex: Female**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: June 25, 2007**

Question: Hello. Please tell us your name.

**Interviewee #43: Nangpa Kyipa.**

Q: Do you give permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

**#43: Yes.**

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

**#43: Okay.**

Q: During the interview if you wish to take a break or stop the interview at any time, please let us know.

**#43: No, it is not necessary.**

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss some issue, please tell us.

**#43: Okay.**

Q: If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

**#43: Why should there be? I am going to tell the sufferings caused by them [the Chinese]. What can they say?**

Q: I would like to start off by hearing about, if you would tell us about what your life was like in Tibet before the Chinese invasion?

**#43: We were farmers and used to cultivate grains and everything. We were also dairy farmers. We used to milk the cattle and everyday we would get at least five kilograms of butter. There were a lot of animals, about a hundred heads.**

Q: Where did you live in Tibet?

**#43: Phari Khambu.**

Q: Where is it?

**#43: Near Phari. There was a lot of hot springs. If you were ill, you did not have to take medicines. There were 12 spots. They cured all types of diseases within seven days. For any disease, we didn't have to consult a doctor; we just went to the hot springs and got cured.**

Q: How many people were in your family?

**#43: Seven or eight. Some worked on the farm and some went with the cattle.**

Q: What was your daily life like? What would be a typical day at that time? What would you be doing?

**#43: Life in Tibet was happy. Life was very good. I used to go to Bhutan. My husband would milk and churn the milk, and do all the household work. I took care of earning for the family. I went once to Bhutan every year. I would take about 20 bags of rice. When I escaped I had so much in storage, I don't know what the Chinese have done with them [the bags]. There were people in my home. My daughter-in-law is there. In Tibet I did not have children. They were born here. I adopted my brother's son and his wife is still living in the house in Tibet.**

**I am related to the Sera Lachi. The Chinese were torturing people and the Lachi had already escaped earlier. During the meetings the Chinese would say that there were wolves still remaining and they must be eliminated, else the sheep could not live happily. So I had to escape for fear of my life. I came through Lachen and Lachung. I was so happy in Tibet. I am happy here too through the grace of His Holiness, though it's a foreign country.**

Q: Was there any special memory you have of that time when you were a child living in Tibet?

**#43: No, I don't remember. After I came here, I had two sons. The younger one died. His wife lives here with me. She has a son and a daughter. I brought home a nephew of mine to live here. My older son was sent by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Russia to give religious teachings. He [older son] wanted to stay in a retreat but His Holiness persuaded him to teach others.**

Q: Before the Chinese invasion, what part did spiritual practice play in your life?

**#43: The religious practice I did was reciting the *mani* mantra. There was not much time from the field works and nomad life, except for reciting the *mani*.**

Q: Did your brothers and sisters, did they go to the monastery or was it the same as you?

**#43: They were lay people.**

Q: When did you first notice that things started to change?

**#43: I don't remember.**

Q: What news did you hear about the Chinese?

**#43: The Chinese first imprisoned all the leaders. They were put in Phari prison and not provided food. One person from Khambu even died there. He died of starvation.**

Q: Was that someone you knew?

**#43: Yes. His child is living here in the New Settlement [Bylakuppe in India]. His name is Dongdhe Ngawang. The dead person was called Dongdhe Sangay and he died of starvation. So sad! I heard that he [Dongdhe Sangay] used to catch insects and eat them. He was in Samye Prison. We heard of it [Dongdhe Sangay's death] when his family and we escaped.**

**My husband was arrested along with him. There were two Chinese holding him [husband] between them with guns and taking him to the prison. He thought he'd rather be shot dead right there than be imprisoned. He had a golden earring, which he removed and placed it in the pocket of his *chupa* 'Tibetan coat.' He changed his boots and then made a dash away from between the Chinese. They chased him for a short while and then they were ordered to open fire at him. They each had thirty bullets in their guns, which they emptied after him but my husband was not hurt. The *chupa* he was wearing was like a sieve; even the sleeves had bullet holes. I have the *chupa* with me here; I don't know where the children have packed it now. There was not even a bruise on his body.**

**He fled towards Lachen and Lachung. He stayed with an old lady at Lachung. When we arrived there later the old lady would say, "This man has been continuously crying saying that his wife would have been caught and tortured by the Chinese." While there [at Lachung] he had sent some people to bring us, but they could not reach us. Then he came one night to take us. There were seven families who fled together. My husband left a note for his friend, which said, "I have been shot at by a rain of bullets but there is not a bruise on my body while my clothes have become like sieves." Later when the Chinese came to know about this, they swore at him [husband]. Then we made our escape through Lachen and Lachung and reached Gangtok.**

Q: Where are Lachen and Lachung?

**#43: Towards the west. It is across our place, a mountain pass away. There were Indian troops there. It is in India, at the border.**

Q: What did you think when you first heard the stories what the Chinese were doing to the Tibetans?

**#43: The Chinese said that they had come to liberate us. They said that they had come to give to the poor by taking things away from the wealthy. They took things from the rich**

**and gave to the poor. The Chinese told me that half of my possessions would be divided. They told me to bring out half of my things. So I put away all the good things inside and brought out the not so good items. I said that was half of my possessions and they gave it away.**

Q: What did you fear the most from them?

**#43: I feared them because they captured the people. They took away from the rich and gave to the poor. They killed the rich. Our deities saved us. When we reached Lachen and Lachung, we consulted the deities who said that bullets had rained and that they had taken the bullets meant for my husband.**

Q: You are saying they shot people?

**#43: They took away our country. They imprisoned people. In Phari, they dug narrow holes in the ground and put people in there. Those people couldn't move.**

Q: They were burying people alive?

**#43: Yes, they put people in the ground and hardly gave them any food. They couldn't move, couldn't sleep. They just had to remain standing.**

**During my husband's imprisonment, he was made to do a lot of work; transporting stones and sand. Then there was the so-called relaxation policy and he was released. My brother, who was also in prison, while transporting stones and sand would sing a song which had words like these: "White clouds from the east; this is not like a patchwork; the sun will rise from beneath the clouds; and there will be a clear day soon." The other Tibetans told him not to sing this song as the Chinese might hear it. He would reply that it was better to be dead than be forced to do such hard labor.**

Q: Both your brother and husband have been in prison?

**#43: Yes, they were imprisoned. My brother was even taken to China. After we had escaped and he was quite old, my brother was released. The Chinese told him that he had served his time and that he could go back home but he said, "I have nowhere to go. All my relatives and children have escaped to India. I am old and I have no one to go to. You have to take care of me." So they kept him in Lhasa, giving him just measly food.**

**When he was taken to China, he saw many Khampas [people from Kham, the eastern part of Tibet]. He said the province of Kham was very close to China. There were many Khampas in the prison. The Khampas had a lot of things to eat, like bags of *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley,' curds, and meat. They would eat these unseen by the Chinese. At first, when my brother did not know them, seeing them eat and the smell of *tsampa* made him drool. Later when they became friendly, they would give him *tsampa* and meat too. He would eat his fill and feel so happy.**

**The Chinese gave my brother the task of feeding the pigs. So from the pig food, he would pick up some solid pieces and eat.**

Q: When your husband and your brother were in prison, how did you survive?

**#43: I told the Chinese that I was the servant of the Bhutanese—that I was looking after the animals belonging to them. So they didn't do anything to me. I was able to escape and they couldn't torture me.**

Q: You were serving the nomads, so you were able to have food while your husband and brother were in prison?

**#43: My husband and brother were somewhat educated and they were people the villagers looked up to. So the Chinese said that they had ill-treated the people.**

Q: When did you decide that you must leave?

**#43: I don't remember the time. It's been a long time. When we came here [to Bylakuppe], it was a jungle. We were some of the earliest who came here. When we reached Kalimpong, we were told that the Tibetans would be sent back and handed over to the Chinese. There were Tibetans in Kalimpong who had lived there for a long time. Their documents were also taken back and they were told that they'd be expelled. Everyone was crying. Around that time His Holiness the Dalai Lama had reached Bomdila. He met and spoke to an Indian leader and asked him not to send the Tibetans back. So we were allowed to remain.**

Q: I'd like to go back a little before you got to Kalimpong and find out: so what happened to your husband when he was in prison? Was he able to get out or what happened?

**#43: My husband was able to escape from the two Chinese who were holding him. They fired 30 bullets each on him, 60 bullets in total. He wasn't injured, thank God. He fled to Lachen and Lachung. Then he came at night to get us. Then seven families escaped together. If he hadn't come to take us, we would not have been able to flee.**

Q: And your brother? Was he with you too?

**#43: My brother was not with us. He was released much much later. He was taken to China and he was released when he became old. He told them [the Chinese], "I have nowhere to go. My relatives and children have escaped to India. There's no one to feed me. You have to look after me." He was put in an old people's home in Lhasa where he received measly food. It was very much later when we heard that he was in Lhasa. My brother has five sons of whom the oldest went to Tibet to get him. He [brother] was brought here. He lived here for about four to five years and then died.**

Q: And what happened?

**#43: We asked the sister of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who traveled to Tibet, to please bring him to India. When she conveyed to my brother that he must go to India, my brother wouldn't come. He said, "I have five sons and one of them must come to get me. I am old and need help when traveling." He was very headstrong. Then the oldest son went to get him.**

Q: So you said that seven families, including you, escaped to Kalimpong; were all of you able to escape? Did everyone survive?

**#43: We all reached the settlement. We are all here. The seven families are all around here.**

Q: What was the hardest thing for you when you came to Kalimpong? What was the hardest thing for you to deal with?

**#43: I had no problems after we reached India. I am happy here. We have enough to eat. His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke to the Indian [leaders] and we were allowed to stay here. We were provided with food, clothing, and beddings. There was plenty of rice to eat. Thanks to His Holiness, we had no problems.**

Q: When you and your husband arrived from Kalimpong with the other families that escaped from Tibet and you said that were well cared for in Kalimpong. How long did you stay in Kalimpong?

**#43: About one year.**

Q: Actually I want to go back just a little bit because I'm wondering what kind of difficulties you faced during your escape to Kalimpong? Climbing over mountains, were there any extreme hardships that you suffered?

**#43: I don't remember.**

Q: It's good. So you stayed one year in Kalimpong. What did you do during that one year? What did your husband do?

**#43: My husband used to search for firewood and sell it.**

Q: What did you do?

**#43: I knew weaving, so I wove clothes.**

Q: Were you a weaver before you came to Kalimpong? Or did you learn that there?

**#43: I knew it. In Tibet I used to weave. In Tibet I reared animals, wove, did farming; I did a lot of work. I did not sit idle; I endured a lot of hardships.**

Q: How did it come that you left Kalimpong? Did you have to leave Kalimpong? Did you want to leave Kalimpong?

**#43: We were told to go. All the Tibetans were asked to leave.**

Q: You were sent directly to Bylakuppe from Kalimpong?

**#43: Yes, it was directly. We were brought in vehicles. This whole area was a jungle. There was no water when we came. We cleared the whole jungle. Until His Holiness the Dalai Lama came, the Indians used to supply us water from Kushalnagar [nearest town]. His Holiness went up a hill where there was no water but the ground was wet. It was a bit muddy but there was no water flowing. His Holiness prayed here and it became the source of two rivers. Then we had plenty of water.**

Q: Okay. So there were two rivers came as a result of, you feel, the Dalai Lama blessing this area?

**#43: Yes, thanks to His Holiness. Otherwise people used to be killed by the elephants. Three were trampled to death by the elephants which lived quite close by. After His Holiness came, the elephants went away.**

Q: Did you yourself see elephants here?

**#43: Yes. I had cultivated a patch of paddy field. The plants were harvested and lying in the field when one night three elephants came and ate everything. I did not get any rice at all.**

Q: Did you see the elephants?

**#43: Yes, I saw three elephants. Until His Holiness' arrival, the elephants used to come here. They left after His Holiness came here. We Tibetans are very fortunate to have such a Buddha among us. Nobody in the world has such a Buddha, we are very fortunate.**

Q: After that year that the elephants had eaten the rice, what thoughts were going through your head that after so much hardship, now you had yet this most difficult year without rice? What were you thinking at that time?

**#43: I had no feelings. There was nothing to think. Those days we were very poor. We used to eat boiled corn powder and minced tomatoes. Then His Holiness came and he said, "You do not have to eat what you grow. You can sell it and buy things you like to eat. It doesn't mean that you eat what you grow; plenty is available for sale, so buy what you like to eat." There was a man in Camp Number 1 who was eating boiled millet powder which was cooked in the shape of balls. His Holiness asked him, "What is this black thing you are eating?" He replied that this was millet. His Holiness asked, "Do you have some in your vessel?" So the man offered him his vessel from which the Dalai Lama took a bit and said, "This doesn't look good but the taste is not bad."**

Q: It sounds like the Dalai Lama played a huge role in making it possible for you to survive here?

**#43: Of course, it is all the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Otherwise what do we have? Who will look after us?**

Q: Did you ever feel like giving up?

**#43: Yes, sometimes. What would we be without His Holiness? The place even had no water before His Holiness came. After His Holiness arrived we had water, we had good harvests. Before that three people were killed by elephants. Even the elephants ran away after His Holiness came.**

Q: How long did it take before your life started to improve here in Bylakuppe?

**#43: Maybe five to six years.**

Q: You came here with your husband together?

**#43: Yes.**

Q: Did you have children?

**#43: Yes, two sons. The younger one died and the older one is at present in Russia giving teachings at four religious centers.**

Q: In Russia? How did your younger child die?

**#43: He died of tuberculosis. Those days we were poor and we had to do such hard work. He went to sell sweaters and did a lot of work and fell ill. He died of tuberculosis.**

Q: That was in Bylakuppe?

**#43: Yes.**

Q: I am sorry...I just have a few more questions. If you could go back to Tibet now, would you go?

**#43: I would go. I think I am able to go. I can see the snow-capped mountains. It's okay to even die on the mountain pass, if I could see Tibet from there. My heart will feel that I am in Tibet.**

Q: You want to see the mountains of Tibet. Is that the thing you miss most about Tibet?

**#43: Yes, I remember that a lot. That was a very happy land. As nomads there's plenty of meat, butter, and cheese.**

Q: As a nomad. And that's the life...you still miss that life?

**#43: Please help us to go back to Tibet.**

Q: What from Tibet would you like most to be preserved for future generation of Tibetans?

**#43: Our religion and culture and whatever His Holiness the Dalai Lama says. What can I say?**

Q: Is there any advice you would give the younger generation about...from your experience? What would you tell them?

**#43: Be good and practice your religion. Do whatever His Holiness the Dalai Lama says. There is no one like him in the world. Even if His Holiness says "die," it's better to die.**

Q: Thank you for your participation.

**#43: Thank you.**

END OF INTERVIEW