

Tibetan encounter with English in Exile: The Context and the Making of the Book 'Red Star over Tibet'

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The book Red Star Over Tibet (1974) was the first work on Tibet in English by a Tibetan of peasant background in a world where the monks and aristocrats had predominantly produced literary works. While understanding the idea of exile where the work was written during the beginning of the author's career, the book articulates an alternate voice of exiled Tibetan in India in terms of social location and in terms of the themes selected. It engages with modernity and English while trying to critique the Chinese invasion without being an apologist for the old order in Tibet.

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English and modernity were both alien to pre-1959 Tibet, and it has been argued that the first large scale encounter with modernity in Tibet was only in 1959 that came along with the Chinese invasion. In the wake of the Chinese invasion, the XIVth Dalai Lama, along with many of his followers, fled into exile in India. Many other Tibetans from all parts of Tibet also continued to trickle to India and settled here as exiles and have engaged in the preservation of Tibetan culture in the context of modernity that they experienced in India. While either monks or aristocrats who were the traditional elite in old Tibet authored most of the writings about Tibet, *Red Star over Tibet* is the first work written by a Tibetan of peasant origin who tries to come to terms with modernity through the English language. The book explains the Tibetan predicament to a non-Tibetan audience that breaks many stereotypes and challenges China's civilising mission in Tibet. China's critique regarding Old Tibet was the predominance of the monastic elite, who were inward-looking and exploitative, and this forms the context for a discussion on Old Tibet that would explain the rise of monks and how Dawa Norbu, the author of *Red Star Over Tibet*, engages with this question. A striking feature of the Tibetan polity was the absence of monarchy and the restructuring of the political process based on the monastic rule from the 17th century.¹ As such, the relegation of royalty and military to the background and the ascendancy of the monastic element as the prime institution all over Tibet created a unique situation that has no comparison.² One of the essential features of the monastic polity was based on the idea of secluding Tibet from all outside influences as these influences could contaminate the Dharma and were, therefore, were labelled as Tendra or enemies of the faith.³ The mighty Himalayas and deserts shielded Tibet and provided a natural barrier, and the Inner Asian tribes who were devoted to the Tibetan lamas provided security along the frontiers of China, which was its weakest point.⁴ In the northern

border of Tibet, the Mongol tribes of the frontier obeyed only the Tibetan lamas, and they emerged as an asset to China.⁵ Incidentally, the Fourth Dalai Lama Yonten Gyatso hailed from Mongolia and was of Mongol royal lineage.⁶ The point of tracing all these complex histories is to show that the transactions with many of the states and non-state spaces in Central Asia were carried out through the medium of classical Tibetan.⁷ These connections endured for centuries and gave the Tibetan language a confidence that it would last long as the literary elite of classical Tibetan, the lamas were continually patronised. It was on this solid basis that the Tibetan culture and language was reproduced in a harsh landscape that prompted the Tibetans to eschew all foreign influences. Dawa Norbu also mentions these in his work and feels that such a preface is necessary for a western reader to understand the context but introduces a slight twist. He does this by referring to the vastly changed political context in China that emerged from the eighteenth century when Sino-Tibetan relations were influenced by western political ideas.⁸ According to him, this was the point of departure as the Buddhist emperors of China did not use the lamas as political puppets.⁹ Though he continues a scholarly analysis of the same theme in his later academic works with great rigour, the basic idea of the Europeanization of international relations is shown in this work. Further, the rise of the monastic element was unparalleled in world history, where a quarter of the adult population were monks or nuns. Lhasa, the home of the three great monasteries Sera, Ganden and Drepung, housing thousands of monks, was a very conservative force and opposed any modernising efforts.¹⁰

As Tibet was isolated, the gaze of the west penetrated sharply, culminating in the race to enter Lhasa, and this was also couched in a language that exaggerated the exotic nature of Tibet.¹¹ Many events like the Great Game and the World Wars changed the face of the world but had no impact on people within Tibet, and they remained uninformed and unconcerned. The very few who understood these events were some Tibetans who had gone to Kalimpong and Darjeeling to study English, but they sadly did not make any impact.¹² The most important event during this period was the proclamation of independence between Tibet and Mongolia in 1913. However, this document was also not translated into any language, and no exercise was made to explain Tibetan independence in the western languages of the protocols of modern diplomacy of the outside world.

One of the most extreme refusals to access the English language was the unopened letters from the English mission to the office of the XIIth Dalai Lama that was not only unopened but also filled with dung and sent back.¹³ In Gyantse, an English school was opened and had to be shut down in three years in 1926 and was the first attempt to start an English school in Tibet. Later another English school was opened in Lhasa after much discussion that was also closed after the monastic reaction.¹⁴ There were rumours in the three big monasteries of Lhasa that the English school would lead to a new generation of people who would have no regard for Buddhism, and hence the monastic reaction led to the schools' closure.¹⁵ Dawa Norbu also criticises the monks for closing these two schools but also says that they sincerely believed that whatever they were doing was right and in the interest of Lamaism –the Tibetan national aspiration but does not support this view also.¹⁶

They were, however, some faint voices who tried to engage with English, and one of them was the Rev. Gergan Babu Tharchin based in Darjeeling, and who also started the first Tibetan newspaper and was trained in reading the Bible. However, to his credit, he did not indulge in any religious propaganda in Tibet to use his newspaper for any proselytisation. He was interested in the modernisation and independence of Tibet.¹⁷ In the blurb of the book, Dawa Norbu remarks that if only the ruling classes in Tibet and India had heeded the advice of Gergan Babu Tharchin, the fate of Tibet would have been different.¹⁸ Similarly, there were four students taken from Tibet sent to train in England in various disciplines, and they hoped to start the road to the modernisation of Tibet. The four boys between the ages between eleven and seventeen were the first Tibetans to acquire knowledge of the English language.¹⁹ But after their return to Tibet, the modernisation project also did not bring any large-scale engagement with English. In this era of suspicion, the monastic element exerted enormous pressure, and Lungshar, the chief architect of this project and an aristocrat, was blinded.²⁰ With this incident, the end of western influences and the impact of English was suddenly stopped though there were great changes in China and India where the freedom struggles were being waged but had no impact on the suspicious Tibetans. Dawa Norbu's unorthodox style is also evident when he deals with such themes and addresses that such suspicions continued in the minds of the Tibetans even in exile. His writings evoked such strong reactions later that he was accused of being a Chinese spy, a Communist, a Christian, and many other charges, so much so that he was forced to go in hiding in India and things settled to normalcy when the Dalai Lama intervened.²¹

The events of 1959 in Tibet led to the flight of the XIVth Dalai Lama to India, along with 80,000 of his followers. It was during this time that a new chapter came up in Tibetan history, the large-scale forced encounter with modernity but in exile and is labelled as a 'rude encounter with modernity.'²² In exile, in India, the Buddhist monasteries were re-established; there was also a focus on education and the need to engage with modern secular education that brought English into focus. While the curriculum was also significantly modified within India, the focus on English began with earnest and was primarily embraced by the aristocratic classes. There was a preference for English amongst the upper ranks of the Tibetans.²³ While international relations between Tibet and the neighbouring countries were articulated for centuries in a Buddhist vocabulary, the cornerstone of which was known as *Cho-Yon* or a priest patron relationship that had stood steady for centuries, the new currents led to the Europeanization of international relations between Tibet and China from the late eighteenth century onwards leading to a radically changed situation was not understood in full by the Tibetans.²⁴ It was the traditional elites, the monks and the aristocrats who articulated the independence of Tibet in 1959 as the leaders. Therefore it led to immediate criticism by the Chinese communists. In exile also the question of Tibetan independence was uppermost on the minds of the Tibetans, and the most visible symbol of the same was the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who launched this movement after the dramatic escape from Tibet in 1959 to India. English became the new vehicle for communicating the message of Tibetan freedom to the larger world, and the standard reaction by the Chinese communists was that this was an elitist project. Pro-Chinese organisations started publishing English language books to counter

the Free Tibet propaganda for western audiences.²⁵ Indian communists also echoed their Chinese comrades in critiquing this articulation of freedom, and the Tibetan modernisation project articulated in English as the project of the Tibetan upper classes that comprised the aristocratic and the monastic segments of the Tibetan society.²⁶ American involvement as one of the spokespersons for the Tibetan cause also added fuel to the fire, identifying the Tibetan cause as a reactionary project. But the nationality question and the Chinese aggression into India led to divergent opinions within the Communist Party of India.²⁷ Such views were possible only because of the flow of information in English that affected the Indian communists who for long were blissfully unaware of the Chinese intervention in Tibet.

It is in this context that we focus on the central core of this paper, the text titled *Red Star over Tibet* by Dawa Norbu, published in 1973 at St Stephens College in New Delhi.²⁸ Standing at the intersection of history and the contemporary context of New Delhi where heightened debates about the future of India, heading towards Marxism, as articulated by the Indian Maoists, formed a critical concern and constituted the immediate context.²⁹ Therefore, this text bears the imprint of the twin challenges of articulating the Tibetan modernisation and Freedom Project to a cosmopolitan audience in English, and secondly, the need to engage with the Indian Maoists, who dominated the campus life and campus politics in the 1970s in many elite academic institutions in India.³⁰ Rabindra Ray, the author of the book *The Naxalites and Their ideology*, was also a student of the same St Stephens College in Delhi University and also an active Naxalite and went on to complete his doctoral thesis on the Naxalites typifies a trend of the 1970s.³¹ The postcolonial predicament of India also figured in this context, and in imagining the future vision of a socialist India, there was no room for a tradition-bound hierarchical society in the view of the communists. These were the characteristics that old Tibet stood for, and therefore the project to articulate the case of Tibet became even more challenging. The popularity of the book *Red Star over Tibet* can be judged by the subsequent reprint over many years, and the second reprint was in 1987,³² followed by a new version that added two more articles in 1998 titled *Tibet: The Road Ahead*.³³

In a significant departure from the monastic and aristocratic worldview, *Red Star over Tibet* was the first text of its kind that was authored by a peasant Tibetan and offered the scope to be read through a Marxist framework by acknowledging the author as one who hailed from the labouring classes. But such an exercise did not fructify. Dawa Norbu's narrative is also significant in the sense that this was the first text authored in English by a Tibetan, for it did not belong to the old order and yet argued for the independence of Tibet. The reader can anticipate such popular expressions of nationalism in rural Tibet in his book as the later developments in Tibet confirmed this. In 1979 when a delegation of the Dalai Lama's elder brother Gyalo Thondup went to Tibet, there was very great enthusiasm and a massive reception from the Tibetan masses. Following this, the expectations of the Communist party officials who had thought that the popular support had waned for the Dalai Lama and had also urged the local Tibetan cadres not to vent any anger against the Old Order as they were the guests of the Chinese government were disproved on the ground. Melvyn Goldstein reports that, on the contrary, the masses vied with one another to touch the Dalai Lama's brother, and there was an intense feeling of popular devotion towards the

committee.³⁴ Such an act was contrary to the Marxist understanding of nationalism, whereby the oppressed classes would not identify with the exploiting classes and therefore would collaborate with the exploited classes of other nationalities for liberation, and the Chinese Communist party had also thought that the long years would have made the rural masses antagonistic to Old Tibet which did not happen. *Red Star* was written partly in response to such formulations and thereby challenged the same not through a Lhasa centric view but from the region of Sakya in Central Tibet. As it was the author's home, it was familiar territory, but the author claimed that Sakya was a site to measure the folk reactions and epitomised rural Tibet.³⁵ Naxalites also called the Indian Maoists, echoed the view that the invasion of Tibet by China must be read as the peaceful liberation of Tibet and even the liberation of the serfs and their emancipation.³⁶ But here, one is confronted with a situation where one of the members of the exiled Tibetan community who would be identified as a 'serf' in old Tibet clearly articulated the case for Tibetan freedom from Chinese rule, contested the whole question of the peaceful liberation of Tibet and argued with the Naxalites on their own turf. We also see that in this project, Dawa Norbu's idea of the future and his reading of Tibetan history are also at a considerable distance from the monastic and aristocratic narratives in terms of spatial and thematic choices too.

In this polarised situation, in the 1970s of New Delhi campuses that were dominated by the elite classes of Indians, it became fashionable to wear the sleeves of Naxalism, and many of the students also believed in the emancipatory potential of the Maoist narratives and most of them came from well to do families.³⁷ Even the mainstream Communist Parties of India were dominated by the elites of the Indian society and not the working class at the top levels of the party.³⁸ For once, the tables are turned, and *Red Star over Tibet* now emerged as a text that could no longer be reduced and fitted into the bracket of a reactionary narrative. Further, it also was an eye-opener to the elitism of the Indian Maoists, who mostly hailed from the upper classes, which the author clearly mentioned in his book and whose support for the Chinese position in Tibet was based on their reading that this would give a positive direction to the Tibetan history in terms of future development. Therefore, the text carries not only the engagement with a new adversary, echoing the voice of the oppressor, but also bears the weight of history and its burden that the author tries to engage in a lucid reading style chapter by chapter. While critiquing the government of Old Tibet as decadent, inefficient and feudal for all its religious pretensions, the Chinese regime for all its revolutionary pretensions is characterised by the author as fundamentally colonial, inhuman and tyrannous.³⁹ At the same time, he also argues that to be fair enough to all sides, his work is a departure from the cheap name-calling of Chinese, and he agrees with the land reforms initiated by the Chinese but critiques the same on the grounds that they were almost useless when all the crops were appropriated, and the Tibetans were forced to work under harsh conditions for the glory of China and the Han people and not for Tibet and the Tibetans.⁴⁰

The author's lucid style makes the text readily accessible to the ordinary reader is in contrast to his later publications that a scholarly and a product of his research, training, and the University of California at Berkeley, where he worked for his doctoral degree on the topic of the rise of neo-nationalism in Marxist countries under the supervision of Kenneth Waltz, a neo-realist and one of

the most quoted thinkers in international relations.⁴¹ One can notice the same line of thought in *Red Star over Tibet* and his other celebrated works- *China's Tibet policy*⁴² and *Culture and Politics of Third World Nationalism*.⁴³ While his later works were written after a great deal of research and give an explanation to many of the facts, employing complex theoretical formulations, the first work is targeted towards the general reader and is a guide to the intricacies of understanding Tibet. In the second preface to *Red Star over Tibet* in 1987, the author writes that he did not want to review any of the contents in this though his style of writing and substance of interest had changed after his formal academic training at Berkeley, California.⁴⁴

The most notable of the contemporary Tibetan writers whose works are still in circulation include the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, whose famous work, *My Land and My People* is one of the first and crucial sources for the reconstruction of the last days of old Tibet and the coming of Chinese invasion was published in 1962.⁴⁵ And other work also read along with this is titled the *History of Tibet* by TWD Shakabpa, which is, in fact, the first history book on Tibet authored by a Tibetan in English and gives a narrative of Tibetan history, beginning from the ethnogenesis of the Tibetans to the last days of old Tibet and the Chinese invasion and is based on stable historical sources. At the same time, the XIVth Dalai Lama's work is critiqued as a case for the restoration of old Tibet and the oppressive religious structures since the XIVth Dalai Lama was also the spiritual and temporal leader of entire Tibet and therefore became the stereotype target of communist anger.⁴⁶ TWD Shakabpa, on the other hand, was an aristocrat as the title Tsepon (the title indicated an aristocrat) in his name suggests, and his scholarship was discounted instead; the class background was exaggerated.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Dawa Norbu's class background was not taken into account by many reviewers as it would not go along with the Marxist understanding of a peasant subject arguing for old Tibet. All these narratives are focused on the last days of old Tibet and the rise of the Chinese rule in Tibet and therefore serve as relevant sources for the reconstruction of Tibetan history. The difference in the texts lies not only in the selection of subject matter but also in the treatment of old Tibet and the historical narrative, beginning from the ancient period when Tibet burst on the historical scene transitioning from a nomadic warrior nation to a Buddhist state. In this polarised situation where there are a few works available on the last days of old Tibet, the key question lies in the voice of the masses on which the whole narrative of legitimacy is built by both parties, and it is only recently that new sources in Tibetan have been given voice (though there is a problem of interpolation of memory).⁴⁸

In the Sino Tibetan context, all these three authors would have only come to the crux of the problem, that is, the relations between China and Tibet as the audiences in both these countries were already attuned to these debates and also highly politicised with definitive positions, and it becomes clear that there emerges a dialogue with the audience in terms of the representation of Tibet as a historical and geographical preface becomes necessary when the English audience is introduced to these works. Further, since both the Chinese and Tibetan audiences are already polarised, one need not go extra lengths to maintain an air of objectivity, which is the case needed when one writes in English, and this is one of the difficulties that Dawa Norbu tries to overcome by being impartial and also at times even irreverent to the established narratives.⁴⁹ As there is a

lack of source on this area, which is a highly contested terrain, the last days of old Tibet attracted attention, and the autobiographical account of Dawa Norbu is acknowledged as one of the critical primary sources. Geoffrey Samuel, in his book titled, *Civilised Shamans*, elaborates this point and privileges this work and its position as a departure from the conventional narratives on Tibet.⁵⁰ As the English language and the English-speaking audience in India constituted a vital set of decision-makers, they were wholly composed of modernists who subscribe to the modernising agenda in varying degrees. It is only among the Gandhians and some traditionalists that the idea of privileging tradition was paramount. Among the educated upper classes of India, the Nehruvian paradigms of socialist ideas of progress and their linkages with modernity are clear. One of the significant differences with the Maoists was the way forward through revolution. In contrast, the other classes believed in the modernising potential of democracy and the established communist parties of India also fervently believed in bringing change through the parliament.⁵¹ Dawa Norbu positions himself not as an apologist for the wholesale restoration of the old order but articulates a very different position in favour of a Free Tibet that converges with the monastic and aristocratic narratives on the question of self-rule and the freedom of Tibet from China which is understood as a colonial power and a cultural hegemony.⁵² Such a position is borne out by his reading of history and the treatment of religion in Tibetan society, makes the position more clear and also reveals the intersection between their representations of Tibet in the west and the characterisation of Tibetan religion for a primarily Western audience. Thus the author was confronted with the difficult task of trying to explain Tibetan religion for an English-speaking audience whose ideas of Tibet oscillated between the two extremes of a timeless paradise and feudal oppression derived from western and Chinese representations, respectively.

Dawa Norbu tries to contextualise the Tibetan religion by not adopting a reductive materialist reading or an orientalist apology. On the other hand, his understanding of religion is very different from the earlier narratives, as spells out in his preface that both Western and Tibetan writers are guilty of representing Tibet as a paradise, mainly because of the fundamental nature of Tibetan society and an idealised version of the Buddhist religion.⁵³ He feels that such a position has done much more harm by playing easily into the hands of the Chinese for whom such a text is a ready-made cake to be eaten as the feudal context was avoided.⁵⁴ Buddhist religion in Tibet, he argues, is not a simple phenomenon but has many layers that have permeated the entirety of Tibetan society. His first attack is novel and fresh, and uses the term called masterly evasion and accuses the Buddhist writers of writing the history of Tibet, not only with the Buddhist bias but also with a masterly evasion of all aspects related to the feudal character of pre-modern Tibet.⁵⁵ He also problematises the question of feudalism, questioning whether the experience of British feudalism can be applied in the Tibetan context and argues against this but at the same time acknowledges the hierarchical and stratified nature of old Tibet.⁵⁶ Such a theme is elaborated decades later in the bestseller, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*.⁵⁷ Which is a corrective to the orientalist imaginings, and *Red Star Over Tibet* has, in a way, showing the direction to this book. Therefore, the first large-scale encounter with modernity, which took place, was directly in contrast to some of the elements of feudalism that existed in Tibet when the Chinese knock at the door of Tibet. The author blames

this shying away from modernity due to the ultraconservative nature of the monks who were divorced from reality and also the fact that some of them were indulging in corruption and therefore had a vested interest to keep the old order.⁵⁸ This idea of masterly evasion in one stroke critique the entire set of western narratives that smacked Orientalism and the subsequent Tibetan ventriloquism of the same voice for a western audience which had done more damage than good to their Tibetan cause.

The engagement with Buddhism comes up again and again. It is supplemented by a glossary that explains the peculiarities of Tibetan Buddhism in which the author clearly points out that Tibet had the most copious vocabulary of Buddhism. Yet, there are problems in the actual practices, and he occasionally goes on to bring about historical excerpts regarding the development of Buddhist religion in the back, which also follows a very unusual part that the westerners are not attuned to listening.⁵⁹ In doing so, he dismantles not only the orientalist image of Tibet, created by Western writers, but also the Lhasa centric writings that seek to privilege the yellow Hat (this term is popularly used on account of the yellow hats that the members of the Gelug tradition wear) or the Gelugpa tradition, which is part of the reformist tradition. In this process, he tries to narrate the tradition of the Sakya, of which he was an adherent and also which was numerically one of the most important traditions in Tibetan Buddhism.⁶⁰ Since his hometown was also called Sakya, he is more familiar with the surroundings, and the writings are therefore predominantly anecdotal. One of the reasons for this anecdotal set of writings is also the more deep-seated mistrust of both the monastic and the aristocratic narrative and therefore believed only his family members, which he makes very clear.⁶¹ Themes concerning the Buddhist religion appear again and again in the narratives and thus are justified, for the simple reason that Tibet was a predominantly religious and conservative society. Though Tibet enjoyed a period of de facto independence for thirty-eight years, it was unable to advocate independence. He squarely blames the ignorance and fanaticism of the lamas, the pleasure-loving aristocrats and the utter simplicity and innocence of the Tibetan masses.⁶² But this conservatism was shared by all sections of society. Therefore he does not blame only the monastic or aristocratic elites wholesale but points out some systemic issues. In terms of practice, some Buddhist luminaries lead very spartan lives and earned great spiritual merit and also prestige in the eyes of the ordinary people and became culture heroes to be emulated in future. One of the most important among these is Sakya Pandita, whose scholarship and erudition and personality endeared himself to the invading Mongolian army, so much so that the Mongols embraced Buddhism.⁶³ Tibetan Buddhism, with its usual picture of maroon clad monks meditating in the snowy heights, leading an austere life that derives from textual representations, forms the staple, and this book creatively dismantles the same. By dwelling on the daily life of the rural folk, the narrative includes a wide variety of Buddhist practitioners from the scholastic culture heroes like Sakya Pandita to the wild yogis like Milarepa, who were permanent parts of the Tibetan imaginary.⁶⁴ He goes on to mention the role of the VIth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso, who was more famous for his love poems than religious achievements.⁶⁵ Therefore, the range of practices available in the Tibetan Buddhist realm and the variety also is a far different tour to Tibet, far removed from the standard representations where both European

and Tibetan narratives are present. This tour also embraces the practices of the nomads in the higher reaches of Chang Tang, where he illustrates the preference given to esoteric Buddhism but does not find fault with the esoteric Buddhist practices themselves.⁶⁶ Instead, it is the misrepresentation of such practices at all levels. That is a source of concern, and he makes a rather scathing observation that bribery became a national institution in Tibet.⁶⁷

Bon, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, is also favourably treated, and there is no tinge of anti-Buddhist sentiment towards the Bonpos who were earlier looked on as evil.⁶⁸ Dawa Norbu rehabilitates this position and also finds some fault with Lamaism that killed the fine militant spirit of the Tibetan empire.⁶⁹ Far from labelling Bon as a religion that was redundant, the author points out the vitality of this religion that led to the rise of Tibet as a warrior nation that came to the notice of the world. By speaking about the Bon religion in a very positive light, the author brings about a corrective to Tibetan history by predicting the achievements of the early Empire to the rise of the Bon religion, which is a first of its kind in representing the Bon religion and very positive light.⁷⁰ Further, he also traces some of the practices of Tibetan Buddhism, like the rituals of Kusang and Tsewang that were to ensure good luck and long life, respectively, as continuations of the Bon tradition.⁷¹

The idea of education is contrasted in an interesting way between three schools of education, the traditional Buddhist educational system of Tibet, the Chinese education brought in by the invading forces of Mao and English education in India, all of which the author experienced. It is here that we get a first-hand idea of English education and its varying reach among the diverse peoples in India. While Darjeeling traditionally was one of the destinations for Tibetans to study and also had emerged as an essential destination for English language education in the famed convent schools that had a name among the Himalayan populations of eastern India.⁷² Among the Tibetans, it catered mainly to the aristocratic segment.⁷³ By providing to this segment and bringing out the subjectivity of an educated English student dressed in a proper shirt and tie, the image of a convent educated student was constituted in the minds of the public. In contrast, the English-language education that Dawa Norbu expected after a brief study in the exiled Tibetan educational system in India was totally different from this imagination.⁷⁴ In fact, the dream of studying in a school where students wore ties and caps was shattered when he saw many Anglo Indians barefoot in St. Grahams School, Kalimpong.⁷⁵ This journey also came late and not at the expected age as he narrates that he entered school at a time when students would be leaving school and with the baggage of Tibetan education in his native Sakya and a brief education at a Tibetan school in Darjeeling.⁷⁶ The issue of class comes to the forefront in an incident in which his mother and sister visited the school, and they looked so poor and dirty that they disowned them and asked them to leave the compound. He says that they looked so poor and dirty and that he pretended not to have any connections with them. While writing this book, he admits that he was ashamed of the above incident, and this is a frank admission on his part and points to the peer pressure of elitism.⁷⁷

In the traditional system of education that he received in Tibet, the main focus of mastering legible writing took a long time and made students excellent calligraphers and copyists, but killed all semblance of creativity.⁷⁸ There is heavy criticism of this method by the author, and in the next

step that followed was the transformation of the school in his native Tibet under the Chinese rule that is taken up for detailed analysis in a chapter titled schools are the old and new and main focus here is the narrative of indoctrination of socialism.⁷⁹ One of the instances that he mentions is an episode of Tibetan history. While the Chinese criticised Tibetan religion, there were some quarters open, and one is the character of Wen Cheng Kong Jo, the Chinese consort of the first Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo, who was represented in a positive light by saying that the marriage with Chinese princess made both the Chinese and the Tibetans as blood brothers.⁸⁰ The classroom emerged as a site for indoctrination with the fact that ever since this marriage Tibet became part of China and this led to a retort from the Tibetan students in the classroom. Songtsen Gampo also had a Nepalese wife in addition to Tibetan wives. As this was part of the historical memory, the students would assert that by marrying a Nepalese princess, Nepal also became part of Tibet. Such disagreements showed the reaction to indoctrination.⁸¹ Most Chinese narratives echo this position and privilege the princess Wen Cheng Kong Jo,⁸² whereas the Tibetans view her not simply as a Chinese person but as a deity named Gyasa or the White Tara. Such a level of indoctrination and the everyday travails was what made his extended family think of escaping to India, which itself was a courageous and adventurous action and also a very risky one.⁸³ In the section on the role of collaborators, the Chinese administrative system in Tibet is taken up for detailed treatment, and he enriches this narrative by quoting examples of how students who were indoctrinated in Peking realised the truth and made a dash for freedom to India, citing the case of an aristocrat Kunsang Paljor.⁸⁴

Handwriting comes in once again when he mentions that while in school in India, he was perpetually short of writing material, and the same would have been provided if he were to remain in Tibetan Chinese rule.⁸⁵ The obsession with handwriting goes on, and he mentions that in all the notebooks, he used to write three times, including on the covers and in the margins, first in Tibetan and then twice in English over and over again to perfect the English handwriting. Such a precarious existence only talks about his constant motivation that sustained his learning.⁸⁶ The school, he adds, was like a battlefield, and it instilled in him a burning intensity that he channelized into the practice of reading, and he got so used to reading and read even while eating and never felt tired or bored.⁸⁷

One of the crucial books in English that he mentions is Heinrich Harrier's *Seven Years In Tibet*, where he talks of the sad plight of Tibet that is stated in this book. In 1949, not a single person in Tibet could produce a counter-narrative of the independence of Tibet, which the author says, was a squandered chance as Tibet had been practically free from 1912 to 1950.⁸⁸ One of the important points regarding his writing in English was that it helped to argue about the nature of Tibetan independence to a larger audience and to examine life in Tibet critically, bringing about a fresh intervention in the narratives of Tibet. Even at that young age, he brings to our notice an important pronouncement of chairman Mao in 1931, when Mao was the chairman of the first Chinese Soviet Republic and declared in its constitution the right to self-determination for all the national minorities.⁸⁹ This statement of Mao is generally overlooked or ignored.

From the following narrative, we see that there emerges an alternative view of Tibet, which

is said in English by an authentic peasant voice. This idea of old Tibet is strongly critiqued, and also, the stratified order of society and the decadence of Buddhist practice are rebuked. At the same time, he was sending out a compelling narrative that the whole idea of exploitation as propounded by the Naxalites was wrong. It also goes on to say that though many of the poorer classes in Tibet had genuine grievances, there was also a powerful sense of social mobility in Tibetan society, and unfortunately, these aspects and diversities of Tibetan society were missed out in the polarised narratives. Though subsequent versions of the book have appeared, the author has not changed any of the material or edited it as he claims that it was his gut reaction.⁹⁰ We also noticed the novelty of his own experience in his writing. English in the hands of a Tibetan from an ordinary peasant family led to a fresh narrative that has dislodged many of the standard representations of Tibet. In its place, there emerge a diversity of voices from groups like the nomadic people,⁹¹ the low caste or the impure bones as the butchers and the blacksmiths were called,⁹² the different sects of Buddhist practitioners,⁹³ and also the Bon religions.⁹⁴ While there are many other things in this book that takes upon everyday aspects of the lives of ordinary Tibetans, they are not being taken up in detail as the prime focus is on representation using the English language. At the end of the book, the bibliography also slightly differs from books of his own period as they include some unconventional terms and even terms that are to be clarified to an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with Tibet. One may conclude that while this work is an out and out political project, the lucid style, the engagement with rural themes and the inner opposition to an established order while arguing for Tibet's independence is a pioneering attempt to find a new voice for Tibet. In this exercise, we see the dismantling of familiar Lhasa centric themes that are orientalist in nature being skilfully dismantled, and in their place, more weight is given to rural life. Anecdotes are strewn all over to provide a strong empirical basis and also serve to animate the text and reflect a lost world. However, this lost world is also different from the European imaginations of an exotic Tibet and is also yearning for freedom. Thus, the book succeeds in representing rural Tibet, where the largest group of Tibetans lived and the folk voices as an authentic barometer of the popular mood for English audiences. Nomads, who formed another component, were taken up, but as their presence was not there in Sakya, there was no large scale engagement with them in Sakya. The author accomplishes his work of dismantling the earlier works skilfully by being part of the Tibetan tradition and gives enormous weight to tradition to fashion this narrative.

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