

Truth of Tibet I

Condensed from *Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth* by Dr. Michael Parenti.

To most of us, Tibet recalls a heaven of mystery and charm. The Himalayas, mirror-like lakes, the magnificent Potala Palace, and the pure sky constitute a picture of Shangri-La. But that's not the complete story of Tibet before the 1950s. Before the Democratic Reform of 1959, Tibet had long been a serfdom society under the despotic political-religious rule of lamas and nobles, a society that was darker and crueler than the European serfdom of the Middle Ages.

At that time, more than 90 percent of the Tibetan population was made up of serfs. They had no land or freedom, and their survival depended on estate holder's manors. Normally, the serf owners had penitentiaries or private prisons on their manorial grounds, as did large monasteries. Punishments were extremely savage and cruel, including gouging out eyes, cutting off ears, hands and feet, pulling out tendons and throwing people into water. **Before the 1950s, Tibet was one of the regions witnessing the most serious violations of human rights in the world.**

The fifth Dalai Lama once issued the order, "Commoners of Lhari Ziba listen to my order: ... I have authorized Lhari Ziba to chop off your hands and feet, gouge out your eyes, and beat and kill you if you again attempt to look for freedom and comfort." This order was reiterated on many occasions by his successors in power.

After 1959, the central government conducted the Democratic Reform in Tibet and abolished the extremely decadent and dark serfdom. One million serfs and slaves have been emancipated since then. Before the 1950s, there were no schools in the modern sense. Now, every Tibetan has the equal right of receiving an education. All the study costs of Tibetan students, from primary school to university, are covered by the government.

From 1959 to the present, the average life span has increased from 36 years to 67 years, and the death rate of infants has decreased from 20 percent to 0.661 percent. The population in 1953, according to the census done by the local government headed by the Dalai Lama, was 1 million. Now there are 2.6 million people living in Tibet, and 92 percent of them are ethnic Tibetans. Since 1970, the natural population growth rate of Tibet has been above the average national level.

The world still knows very little about real developments in this region. Those who once deprived the Tibetans of all personal freedom now shout that the human rights of the people there are being deprived. Rumors, distortion and misleading information all combine to form a layer of mist enveloping the region. I know this small handout cannot change the long-standing view in western world, but I did hope it can give you a different perspective on real Tibet, real human rights for majority of Tibetan!

Truth of Tibet II

Recent riot in Tibet elicited mounting criticism toward Chinese government. Tibet-separatists, usually the exiles and their offspring, gathered and had some not-so-peaceful demonstrations all around the major western countries. So, who are they, why are they so angry, are they really warriors fighting for human rights?

Tibet was always depicted as a “Shangri-La” in western world. However, the sad truth is that Tibet buddhism has had a close relationship not only with violence but with economic exploitation. Indeed, it is often the economic exploitation that necessitates the violence. Such was the case with the Tibetan theocracy. Until 1959, when the Dalai Lama last presided over Tibet, most of the arable land was still organized into manorial estates worked by serfs. These estates were owned by two social groups: the rich secular landlords and the rich theocratic lamas. Even a writer sympathetic to the old order allows that “a great deal of real estate belonged to the monasteries, and most of them amassed great riches.” Much of the wealth was accumulated “through active participation in trade, commerce, and money lending.” ¹

Drepung monastery was one of the biggest landowners in the world at that time, with its 185 manors, 25,000 serfs, 300 great pastures, and 16,000 herdsmen. The wealth of the monasteries rested in the hands of small numbers of high-ranking lamas. Most ordinary monks lived modestly and had no direct access to great wealth. The Dalai Lama himself “lived richly in the 1000-room, 14-story Potala Palace.” ²

Secular leaders also did well. A notable example was the commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army, a member of the Dalai Lama’s lay Cabinet, who owned 4,000 square kilometers of land and 3,500 serfs. ³ Old Tibet has been misrepresented by some Western admirers as “a nation that required no police force because its people voluntarily observed the laws of karma.” ⁴ In fact, it had a professional army, albeit a small one, that served mainly as a gendarmerie for the landlords to keep order, protect their property, and hunt down runaway serfs.

Young Tibetan boys were regularly taken from their peasant families and brought into the monasteries to be trained as monks. Once there, they were bonded for life. Tashì-Tsering, a monk, reports that it was common for peasant children to be sexually mistreated in the monasteries. He himself was a victim of repeated rape, beginning at age nine. ⁵ The monastic estates also conscripted children for lifelong servitude as domestics, dance performers, and soldiers.

In old Tibet there were small numbers of farmers who subsisted as a kind of free peasantry, and perhaps an additional 10,000 people who composed the “middle-class” families of merchants, shopkeepers, and small traders. Thousands of others were beggars. There also were slaves, usually domestic servants, who owned nothing. Their offspring were born into slavery.⁶ The majority of the rural population were serfs. Treated little better than slaves, the serfs went without schooling or medical care, They were under a lifetime bond to work the lord's land--or the monastery's land--without pay, to repair the lord's houses, transport his crops, and collect his firewood. They were also expected to provide carrying animals and transportation on demand.⁷ Their masters told them what crops to grow and what animals to raise. They could not get married without the consent of their lord or lama. And they might easily be separated from their families should their owners lease them out to work in a distant location.⁸

As in a free labor system and unlike slavery, the overlords had no responsibility for the serf's maintenance and no direct interest in his or her survival as an expensive piece of property. The serfs had to support themselves. Yet as in a slave system, they were bound to their masters, guaranteeing a fixed and permanent workforce that could neither organize nor strike nor freely depart as might laborers in a market context. The overlords had the best of both worlds.

One 22-year old woman, herself a runaway serf, reports: “Pretty serf girls were usually taken by the owner as house servants and used as he wished”; they “were just slaves without rights.”⁹ Serfs needed permission to go anywhere. Landowners had legal authority to capture those who tried to flee. One 24-year old runaway welcomed the Chinese intervention as a “liberation.” He testified that under serfdom he was subjected to incessant toil, hunger, and cold. After his third failed escape, he was mercilessly beaten by the landlord's men until blood poured from his nose and mouth. They then poured alcohol and caustic soda on his wounds to increase the pain, he claimed.¹⁰

The serfs were taxed upon getting married, taxed for the birth of each child and for every death in the family. They were taxed for planting a tree in their yard and for keeping animals. They were taxed for religious festivals and for public dancing and drumming, for being sent to prison and upon being released. Those who could not find work were taxed for being unemployed, and if they traveled to another village in search of work, they paid a passage tax. When people could not pay, the monasteries lent them money at 20 to 50 percent interest. Some debts were handed down from father to son to grandson. Debtors who could not meet their obligations risked being cast into slavery.¹¹

The theocracy's religious teachings buttressed its class order. The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their troubles upon themselves because of their wicked ways in previous lives. Hence they had to accept the misery of their present existence as a karmic atonement and in anticipation that their lot would improve in their next lifetime. The rich and powerful treated their good fortune as a reward for, and tangible evidence of, virtue in past and present lives.

The Tibetan serfs were something more than superstitious victims, blind to their own oppression. As we have seen, some ran away; others openly resisted, sometimes suffering dire consequences. In feudal Tibet, torture and mutilation--including eye gouging, the pulling out of tongues, hamstringing, and amputation--were favored punishments inflicted upon thieves, and runaway or resistant serfs. Journeying through Tibet in the 1960s, Stuart and Roma Gelder interviewed a former serf, Tsereh Wang Tuei, who had stolen two sheep belonging to a monastery. For this he had both his eyes gouged out and his hand mutilated beyond use. He explains that he no longer is a Buddhist: "When a holy lama told them to blind me I thought there was no good in religion."¹² Since it was against Buddhist teachings to take human life, some offenders were severely lashed and then "left to God" in the freezing night to die. "The parallels between Tibet and medieval Europe are striking," concludes Tom Grunfeld in his book on Tibet. ¹³

In 1959, Anna Louise Strong visited an exhibition of torture equipment that had been used by the Tibetan overlords. There were handcuffs of all sizes, including small ones for children, and instruments for cutting off noses and ears, gouging out eyes, breaking off hands, and hamstringing legs. There were hot brands, whips, and special implements for disemboweling. The exhibition presented photographs and testimonies of victims who had been blinded or crippled or suffered amputations for thievery. There was the shepherd whose master owed him a reimbursement in yuan and wheat but refused to pay. So he took one of the master's cows; for this he had his hands severed. Another herdsman, who opposed having his wife taken from him by his lord, had his hands broken off. There were pictures of Communist activists with noses and upper lips cut off, and a woman who was raped and then had her nose sliced away.¹⁴

Earlier visitors to Tibet commented on the theocratic despotism. In 1895, an Englishman, Dr. A. L. Waddell, wrote that the populace was under the "intolerable tyranny of monks" and the devil superstitions they had fashioned to terrorize the people. In 1904 Perceval Landon described the Dalai Lama's rule as "an engine of oppression." At about that time, another English traveler, Captain W.F.T. O'Connor, observed that "the great landowners and the priests... exercise each in their own dominion a despotic power from which there is no appeal," while the people are "oppressed by the most monstrous

growth of monasticism and priest-craft.” Tibetan rulers “invented degrading legends and stimulated a spirit of superstition” among the common people. In 1937, another visitor, Spencer Chapman, wrote, “The Lamaist monk does not spend his time in ministering to the people or educating them. . . . The beggar beside the road is nothing to the monk. Knowledge is the jealously guarded prerogative of the monasteries and is used to increase their influence and wealth.”¹⁵

As much as we might wish otherwise, feudal theocratic Tibet was a far cry from the romanticized “Shangri La” so enthusiastically nurtured by Da Lai Lama’s western proselytes, such as the pop stars in Hollywood, who possess so limited knowledge on Tibet history. It also becomes so clear where the Tibet separatists’ hatred comes from-- deprivation of their privilege as slave masters! So, in closing, let’s all wish good luck to Tibet, and to 95% of real Tibetans!

Reference

- 1: Pradyumna P. Karan, *The Changing Face of Tibet* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 64.
2. See Gary Wilson's report in *Worker's World*, 6 February 1997.
3. Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, 62 and 174.
4. As skeptically noted by Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 9.
5. Melvyn Goldstein, William Siebenschuh, and Tashì-Tsering, *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashì-Tsering* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).
6. Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, 110.
7. Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet 1913-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 5 and passim.
8. Anna Louise Strong, *Tibetan Interviews* (Peking: New World Press, 1959), 15, 19-21, 24.
9. Quoted in Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, 25.
10. Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, 31.
11. Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, 175-176; and Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, 25-26.
12. Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, 113.
13. A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet* rev. ed. (Armonk, N.Y. and London: 1996), 9 and 7-33 for a general discussion of feudal Tibet; see also Felix Greene, *A Curtain of Ignorance* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 241-249; Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 3-5; and Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, passim.
14. Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*, 91-96.
15. Waddell, Landon, O'Connor, and Chapman are quoted in Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain*, 123-125.