

**Empowerment of Women:
Answers from Tibet**

Alladi Jayasri

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Foundation for Universal Responsibility

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Preface

The Scholar of Peace Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and Special Projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign policy practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series *WISCOMP Discussion Papers* in conjunction with *WISCOMP Perspectives* brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership.

Empowerment of Women: Answers from Tibet, the fourth in the series of WISCOMP Discussion Papers, is the outcome of a media fellowship awarded to Alladi Jayasri to research a series of articles on Tibetan women in settlements in Karnataka and the extent to which they participate in the functioning of a nation-in-exile. These articles were first published in *The Hindu* in the year 2001.

By tracing the lives and times of Tibetan women in “settlements” spread across Karnataka, Alladi Jayasri brings alive the circumstances under which a generation of Tibetans fled their homeland, the faith that sustains them, the challenges of setting up a “mobile republic” in India (a nation without geography), the working of the Tibetan People’s Deputies and the vision of a future Tibet, as seen through the lens of Tibetan women in India. These are stories of indomitable courage in all situations, born perhaps from a belief system that stresses the philosophy of impermanence in the face of hostile circumstances.

In particular, the articles look at the lives of seven Tibetan women – Lhasa Dolma, the managing partner of the Shangrila restaurant in Bangalore, Tsering Norzum Thonsur the elected member of the Tibetan People’s Deputies, Tsering Dolma of the Regional Tibetan Women’s Association, Tharlam Dolma Changra the first Tibetan woman to become principal of a Central School for Tibetans, Tashi Tsomo, the oldest nun of the Sera monastery in Bylakuppe, Dolma Yangchen, President of the Regional Tibetan Association and Passang Lhamo Neshar, practitioner of Tibetan medicine – to examine and understand Tibetan women’s perceptions on the empowerment that they have

achieved while awaiting a return to their homeland. Alladi Jayasri believes that the stories of these seven outstanding women are not atypical and that Tibetan women in India have been able to straddle the two worlds of tradition and progress, confident that they can bridge the two in a Tibet that they hope will be free in the future.

The literacy rate among Tibetan women in India is as high as ninety per cent, women professionals are hardly a rarity yet most of the women are perfectly comfortable with their own culture, language and traditions and with their roles as wives and mothers. Alladi Jayasri highlights the dual role of Tibetan women in exile – as active participants in the movement for freedom, and as guardians of a unique culture and tradition handed down to them over the generations. The fact that they seem to have straddled both the worlds with apparent felicity is perhaps the greatest tribute to their ability to convert adversity to advantage.

It is this spirit of courage and conviction that reverberates in Lhasa Dolma whose parents followed His Holiness the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 and who made the transition from a contented homemaker to managing partner of a Tibetan restaurant after her husband passed away. It echoes too, though in a different vein, through Tashi Tsomo, the 60 year old nun at Sera Monastery who had to live in a cave for five years before she could escape to India. For Tashi Tsomo, now cloistered at Bylakuppe, the largest Tibetan settlement in Karnataka, solace has come through prayer, which she also sees as one facet of empowerment.

Another dimension of the Tibetan woman in exile – that of a political activist – is exemplified by Tsering Norzum Thonsur born in the Tibetan settlement of Mundgod in Uttara Kannada and a member of the Tibetan People's Deputies, where she participates in parliamentary debates and tables motions. Another member of the Tibetan People's Deputies, Tsering Dolma, a much loved grandmother, sees her political role as a natural extension of her responsibilities as a mother.

The vision of a future Tibet is reflected, by a school principal, Tharlam Dolma Changra, the first Tibetan woman to attend Mysore University. Her vision is that of a Tibet which is modern and progressive yet in tune with its age old tradition and culture and she takes pride in the fact that the children in her school are as Tibetan as they can be. Helping

Tibetan women experience Tibet from a distance of thousands of miles is the task that Dolma Yangchen, President of the Regional Tibetan Women's Association at Byllakupe, sets herself. She sees her role as one of preserving and promoting the culture and traditions of Tibet even as the community in exile come to terms with the forces of globalization and liberalization. She and her group perceive a dual role for themselves; one that embraces women into the movement for a free Tibet and another that builds bridges between Tibet of the settlements, the world within occupied Tibet and rest of the world.

Travelling between the Tibetan settlements in Byllakupe, Hunsur, Kollegal and Mundgod, in the state of Karnataka, Alladi Jayasri set out to explore, in the course of this media fellowship, the extent to which women are participants in the running of the Tibetan nation-in-exile. These articles document the life trajectories of women living in these settlements in their host country, India. It chronicles their hopes and coping mechanisms during trials and tribulations, arising from their immediate circumstances or as a legacy of the traumatic memories they carry. The notion of Universal Responsibility and Coexistence as advocated by His Holiness The Dalai Lama and the resources that Tibetan religious and spiritual traditions offer have perhaps been the decisive factors that have enabled the Tibetan community in India to negotiate the experience of refugeedom differently-with fortitude, with dignity and with equanimity.

“Norzum, the new generation Tibetan”

Tsering Norzum Thonsur’s slight, slim form gives no inkling of the important place she holds in the small Tibetan community settled in India. Few are aware, or, perhaps, even interested that two years ago, the over 1.3 lakh Tibetans living as refugees in India elected a brand new Parliament at Dharamshala, the seat of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Fewer still know that Norzum has been re-elected for a second term. She sits, as did in each of the 10 sessions of the 12th Parliament, along with 45 other deputies, in two U-shaped rows meant for the 46 deputies and seven Kalons (ministers) who form the Kashag or Cabinet.

Norzum, born in the Tibetan settlement of Mundgod in Uttara Kannada to parents who had followed the Dalai Lama into India in 1959, after Chinese occupation of Tibet, has never seen the land her parents call a homeland.

Norzum, who studied in Chennai, experimented with the lifestyle that drives the young, happening generation not particularly hampered by Tibetanhood, and quite oblivious of Tibet’s peculiar dilemma. “I wonder if I would’ve taken an interest in politics if I lived in Tibet,” Norzum muses. She forayed into politics and government service by default. A stint in the Regional Tibetan Women’s Association (RTWA) was her first brush with the Tibetan issue, and she did her job well enough to be given greater responsibility as an executive member, and later president.

How did she foray into politics? Since the exile community has no political parties, candidates for elections are thrown up somewhat in the manner of American primaries. Some names are proposed from Dharamshala. Although reluctant at first, Norzum, like most Tibetans, could not but regard “requests” from Dharamshala as a canon from the Dalai Lama himself. Besides, Norzum always loved a challenge.

She is glad, in retrospect. Until the idea of reservation for women was mooted, she, like others, would blanch at the thought of sitting in the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies (ATPD).

Once inside, Norzum had no time for regret. As a novice, Norzum first did little but watch and learn. "I observed that some of the electoral reforms proposed by the Dalai Lama himself were regarded by many as too much freedom too soon," she says. Like any parliament, ATPD witnesses stormy scenes, heated discussions, and inconclusive debates.

"Administration is serious business, and no one even thinks of playing to the gallery." So it was that when reforms seeking to abolish representation to the religious sects in Parliament came up for discussion, many members were agitated, and refused to even contemplate such a move. Norzum did her homework, and mustered the courage to table a motion clarifying her view. "What pained me was not the final decision, but that some members wrote to the Speaker, insisting that it should not even be discussed."

Her chance to shine at policy-making came soon enough though, when a proposal to amend the Charter of Tibetans-in-Exile came up. Norzum successfully tabled a motion amending the Constitution to facilitate the setting up of an interim Cabinet in case it is suddenly dissolved, or if a new Chief Calon has to be installed due to the death of the incumbent. Norzum is glad that women's empowerment has been worked into the larger goal of Tibet's liberation. But she is also sobered by the thought that gender discrimination could emerge as a problem in the future, especially when Tibet is free.

Gyu-Shi, the healing ways of Tibetan medicine

The Tibetan Medical Centre at Mahalakshmi Layout in Bangalore draws more Indian patients than Tibetans, and it makes for an awesome reflection that at this centre, healing comes from the revelations of Buddha in his manifestation as the Bhaishajyaguru or master of remedies, propounded as Gyu-Shi – the four “tantras”.

Passang Lhamo Neshar was born in Bylakuppe and had her education there. She opted for a career in Tibetan medicine in 1982.

She studied at the Tibetan Medicine and Astrology Institute at the Dharamshala set up by the Dalai Lama to ensure that the priceless treasure of Tibetan medicine, quite a clone of Ayurveda, was not lost to Tibetans.

Today, it is as if Shangrila, that mysterious Himalayan repository of the secret of eternal youth, has descended from the heavens to dispense the mantra of instant nirvana.

“Even today, most of the 1.3 lakh Tibetans living in India seek succour and healing from Tibetan medicine,” says Dr. Passang.

When they first came, the hot climate killed many Tibetans. Others died of lung diseases. But today, that is a nightmare that has passed.

Dr. Passang notes that older men and farmers in Tibetan settlements occasionally complain of arthritis or the odd indigestion. Women too are unusually free from the stress and ailments that dog their Indian sorority.

The four “tantras”, covering physiology, pathology, diagnosis, and cure, are texts in the form of a dialogue between the many manifestations of Bhaishajyaguru.

Four sections, 156 chapters, and 5,900 verses are what Dr. Passang mastered over five years.

“Of course, if a doctor does not have the ability to see, she is no use to anyone. Because of the importance of pulse reading in diagnosis, a doctor’s sensibilities are as importance as her expertise,” Dr. Passang says.

When a patient visits her, Dr. Passang will look for imbalances in the so-called humours – the phlegm, wind, and bile.

She then has to analyse various constituents of the body – blood, flesh, bones, waste, and impurities – in 25 divisions as per the tenets of the “Root Tantra”.

If Dr. Passang is in awesome veneration of the fact that she has received knowledge so ancient and eternal, it is because she knows that the original script is said to have been written on sheets of gold with ink made of “lapiz lazuli” and then placed in the custody of celestial nymphs.

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Treatment is administered in strict adherence to the “tantras”.

“First, we see if changes in diet can help, and the behaviour of the patient. If nothing helps, medicine is prescribed. Herbs used in combination with minerals, gems, and semi-precious stones, and occasionally substances of animal extract are administered to the accompaniment of recitation of prayers and mantras invoking the Bhaishajyaguru,” she says.

Dr. Passang is also aware of the fact that there are not too many doctors who can claim to be affiliated to a medical college built more than 300 years ago at Changpori near Lhasa where the priceless library and original paintings, and some ancient texts are housed.

Dr. Passang, and her husband, Dorjee Raptan Neshar, who is the chief medical officer at the centre, are proud to carry on the healing ways of Tibetan medicine far away from their country.

Each year over 25 practitioners graduate from the Dharamshala and start treating not only Tibetans but also Indians as the Neshar couple.

Dr. Passang says that they use modern facilities such as laboratory diagnostics in the course of their work.

“There is cure in the Tibetan medicine for diseases such as hepatitis, thalassemia, and certain types of cancer. The “tantras” also mention an AIDS type of virus that spreads because of imbalances in the environment and internal energies,” she adds.

Recreating the Flavours of Tibet: Meet ... Lhasa Dolma

Nearly everyone who is a gourmet, haunts Brigade Road, and is always game for a feast knows the Shangrila Restaurant, nestling coyly by better-known landmarks such as Nilgiris. Tibetan food, like everything else Tibetan, is an obsession among celebrities everywhere, and Tibet is both the theme and flavour of the month.

For the bookworms, Shangrila (Land of Sacredness and Peace, in Tibetan) is the paradise in the snows celebrated in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. For Bangaloreans, the Shangrila Restaurant is the first joint ever to serve Tibetan and Chinese food since it opened in 1975.

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But Lhasa Dolma, the gritty managing partner of the restaurant, has more than just the cuisine at Shangrila to be proud of. A contented *housefrau* tending her family until her husband's death a few years ago, Dolma was suddenly forced to learn a great deal and do it quickly, the hard way.

The restaurant, which reopened a couple of years ago, has a great ambience, although its doors give no hint of the wonderland within.

Dolma, a baby when her parents – business people from Chamdoh – followed the Dalai Lama in 1959 to take refuge in India after China occupied Tibet, grew up in Sikkim, where they settled to a new and difficult life. She was named Lhasa, after Tibet's capital city, the highest capital in the world.

Dolma later came to Karnataka's Bylakuppe, where one of the largest refugee settlements came up, and went to college at Maharani's. Marriage to a fellow Tibetan, K. Leckjup, who was doing well in the granite business, and two sons kept Dolma a dedicated family person. Tibet was that wondrous place left behind by elders but kept alive by

them for those born long after, just as the Dalai Lama, Tibet's Spiritual and Temporal leader, had ordained.

“We have internalized the belief that this is only a temporary situation, and everyone is commandeered for the task of keeping Tibet alive until our homeland is restored,” Dolma says.

Meanwhile, not many Bangaloreans are aware that March 10 is a very important day in the calendar of the small 300-strong community of Tibetans in the City.

Probably, only a few are aware that this year, Tibetans chose to mark the anniversary of the uprising against the Chinese occupation of their homeland differently: there were no protests or slogan raising in front of Mahatma Gandhi's statue, or even a silent march.

Many Tibetans not involved in government work are chosen by the Dalai Lama to contribute to the cause of Tibet in some way. Dolma has been serving in the Tibetan Freedom Movement, an organization that ensures important events and milestones such as March 10, the Dalai Lama's birthday on July 6, and the December 10 Nobel Peace Prize Day are celebrated or observed in a fitting manner. She also ensures that Tibetans here have their “passport”, or identity cards, intact, and pay the annual fee for it, which is one way of raising funds to run the government.

Dolma has been generously giving time fro nursing the sick and aged in her community, wherever she happens to live. To the floating population of Tibetans, this “Benson Town Auntie” is any-time mom with plenty of tender care to dispense.

It is the Tibetan way to be eternally grateful to India and Indians for coming to their aid, and Dolma has a special reason to thank her Indian friends who are financing her pet project but don't like to have their names bandied about. Bangalore, for all its importance as a transit point for all the settlements, lacks a Tibetan monastery and temple.

Dolma has been busy making amends, and will soon be looking at the fruit of her many years' labour – a monastery on a plot on Mysore

Road, with a small palatial quarter for the Dalai Lama to use. She has three uncles, all scholars at the Sera Monastery in Bylakuppe, encouraging her, and that has made the task a little easier.

Another citizen of the “mobile republic”, the nation without geography, says goodbye, with the reminder that we are yet to enjoy the excellent *momo*, *thupka*, a *champa*, or *shabhalay* that Shangrila dishes up, for Tibetans and Indians alike.

She wants nothing, but the best for ‘her’ children

The Central School for Tibetans looms rather prominently in the unique Tibetan landscape that sets Bylakuppe apart. One wonders what awaits on the other side of the door marked, “Principal”.

Tharlam Dolma Changra, one finds, is of a very charming disposition, and clad in the traditional Tibetan *chopa* and *pangden*, could be easily mistaken for a prosperous Tibetan *hausfrau*. But the first Tibetan woman to become principal of a Central School for Tibetans, is anything but that.

Ms. Thalam La’s growing up coincided with the most traumatic period of a nation-on-the-run. A mere eight when her family followed the Dalai Lama into India in March 1959, along with 80,000 others.

Ms. Tharlam all the same remembers vividly the days of moving from place to place, until the family chose to settle in Bylakuppe, one of the settlements where the Tibetans were given a home.

Recollections of the family estate back in Tibet, in the hills of Kongpo still haunt her, and stories remembered by her father make Tibet more real for her now. Just as real is the nightmare of being on the run, reaching Sikkim somehow with a sister and brother, watching the parents reduced to working for a living.....

“A semblance of stability was restored after settling in Bylakuppe, but even we little ones sensed, that the next few years would be a struggle,” Ms. Tharlam recalls.

In retrospect, she realizes that the entire community of Tibetans arriving in India four decades ago had the unenviable task of keeping Tibet alive for their children, and bequeath the longing to return to their “Land of the Snows” in the remote reaches of the Himalayas.

If she was able to foray into the world outside Bylakuppe, to become one of the first girls to study in Mysore, and then go on to become the

first and only woman to study in Mysore University (she has a master's degree in economics), Ms. Thalam believes it was possible only because her parents and their peers ensured that the Tibetan in her did not allow alienation to deny her roots.

The distinction of being the first Tibetan woman to attend Mysore University also made her feel responsible for creating a good impression about Tibetans among Indians. And good grades were just as important, since it reflected on her community in general.

“We were seven girls studying in Nirmala Convent in Mysore, and the strangeness of coming out of so-called Tibet did not keep us from widening our horizons,” Ms. Tharlam says. And it was natural to feel that after completing her education, she ought to return to work for her community.

Most Tibetans coming from settlements in India and elsewhere return to the community and it was no different for Ms. Tharlam.

She began as an honorary teacher of economics at Bylakuppe, and liked her job so much that she returned to Mysore to train as a teacher, passing with excellent grades. Since then, she has taught in Tibetan schools in Mussoorie, Kalimpong, and Bylakuppe.

In 1991, she became principal of the central school in Dalhousie, the first woman to become so. She came to Bylakuppe CST in 1996.

Looking back, Ms. Tharlam finds it incredible that the Tibetan culture she was born into is alive, even vibrant, and accepted naturally by generations that have never seen Tibet.

“The children in my school are as Tibetan as they can be,” she says, with justifiable pride. Because, in her time, there were no qualified teachers or guides who could transmit their visions of future Tibet.

Forty years on, Ms. Tharlam and her peers realize only too well the immense responsibility thrust on them by the Dalai Lama. “Until we return, Bylakuppe or Mundgod, or Dharamshala is our Tibet,” she says, adding that their home is never far from their thoughts. And then one is grateful for the opportunity to grow, and make the best of what we have.

“Strange as it may sound, it will be a wrench to leave all this behind,” she says, sweeping her arms wide to embrace the little Tibet that has taken a mere three decades to create.

“When we return, Tibet cannot start from 1959,” she says. “Tibet has become cause cerebra among the international community, and it will be very ungrateful of us if we closed the doors to the rest of the world. Besides, modernity and progress has already touched Tibetans, and we shall be needing everyone from shoemakers to policy-makers who will contribute to rebuilding Tibet.”

So it is that children in Ms. Tharlam’s charge are being instilled with values like the dignity of labour, and schooled to consider career options in medicine, engineering, academics..... The children, in fact, work in the school gardens, growing flowers and vegetables, and learn the basic skills and crafts that most Tibetans are expected to know.

“I am sure that if we had not had to leave Tibet, we would have opened out to the world, on our terms and at our pace. But strange circumstances like our present predicament have their odd flipside,” she says, pointing out that it is a good thing for Tibeatans to come out and mix with other societies professionally and socially.

Her own stint at Mysore University and school earlier, broadened her horizons considerably, and hold her in good stead even now.

The new generation Tibetans, moulded by Ms. Tharlam and her ilk will also be taking back to Tibet, when they do, a new-found appreciation and enjoyment of the arts, literature and better appreciate the richness of their own language, culture, and region. At work, Ms. Tharlam wields a firm hand, and children who play hockey and threaten to become dropouts are in terror of her.

“Dropouts can grow up to become a social menace, and we can do without them,” she says. Of course, she has many tricks up her sleeve to bring the reluctant child back to the classroom, and she often seeks out children during the lunch hour, chatting them up, laughing, and listening to their chatter. Parents have to toe the line too, and in case a child comes from a broken home, Ms. Tharlam seeks them out, tries to counsel them about the consequences of their actions on their children.

Ms. Tharlam was chosen by the Dalai Lama in 1996 to become a nominated member of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, Tibet's Parliament-in-Exile. Though determined to serve her community in whatever capacity she was expected to, Ms. Tharlam however was unable to accept the honour. The Dalai Lama then instructed her to continue in her present job, "and work with zeal and devotion". Which she does to this day, wanting nothing but the best for the children – the future seeds of a bright, dignified and free Tibet.

Because the collective tragedy of Tibet's people is that their millennial transitions are taking place in what could be famously described as a mobile republic.

Cloistered at Bylakuppe, she narrates the lost grandeur of Tibet

Knobbly fingers rush to cover the wizened face of the oldest nun in Bylakuppe's Tsogyal Choedup Ling nunnery, as coyness fights curiosity in a losing battle to know more about this visitor from Bangalore who wants to hear her story. Tashi Tsomo, the oldest ani (nun) in the Sera Monastery, is 60, and can speak nothing but Tibetan.

With help from Namgyal, who belongs to the hip generation that has seen nothing of the grandeur of Tibet, we are about to piece together the story of Tashi Tsomo, because she has lived to tell the tale.

“.....My country has not been sold, but stolen; we have sent letters of truth, we have sent letters, Parents of this lifetime, please do not be sad, the time of our reunion will come.”

There is probably no Tibetan, let alone a nun, whose stomach does not lurch in agony when the strains of the “songs of the 14 nuns” waft across their memories. In June 1993, these nuns already imprisoned in Lhasa's dreaded Drupchi prison, had their sentences doubled and tripled for singing and recording their songs on a tape recorder smuggled into the jail. For “spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda”, these nuns were declared offenders who had committed treason.

Ani Tashi Tsomo remembers that, and much more. That day in 1959, when the Dalai Lama, spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, had to flee his homeland, after Chinese occupation. She was barely 20, having recently joined a monastery in Kham province. All her life she had waited to become a nun, and she had been a good daughter to her parents, serving them dutifully. Sorrow and rage fight to wash over her face, as Namgyal's questions probe tentatively, loath as we are to stoke memories of what could perhaps be best forgotten.

Tashi Tsomo's story is important. In the monastery where she currently lives, as do 300 others, is a little girl, barely eight, a novice who will

soon become a nun. Even at that tender age, she must know that Bylakuppe, off Mysore, on the highway of Kodagu, is just Tibet-in-anticipation. This is the largest of the settlements in Karnataka, where over 35,000 Tibetans in five settlements live in the hope that the day will come soon when they can shed their “refugee tag”.

Between Tashi Tsomo, and ani Yeshi Chozum, who is in her early thirties, there is much to be done to keep hope afloat. And this they do with the stories of their life back home. Tashi Tsomo, we learn, in a narration now punctuated with crinkly smiles that reach deep-set eyes even as the anger and sorrow that is every Tibetan’s burden smoulder quietly, was having an ordinary day back in her monastery in Kham, when news of the Dalai Lama’s flight came. She waited with other nuns, wondering what lay ahead. They soon knew. There was the beat of regulation boots on the grounds, and officials of the new regime lined up the inmates of the nunnery, and expelled all of them.

The monks were told to go, too, and no one was allowed to do prayers. “There were two Tulku (higher lamas), who suddenly disappeared. They were probably killed, we never heard of them again,” Tashi Tsomo recalls. For the next one year, it was a life cut away from civilization all right, but the enforced life of austerity that did not permit anyone to take the name of the Dalai Lama was stifling. She does not know what made her do it, or how, but Tashi Tsomo suddenly found herself hitting the road to Lhasa one day. She never made it there, fortunately. She bumped into another nun on the run, and the news she had was fearsome enough for the two to make for a cave on the outskirts, where they hid and lived, for five years, Tashi Tosomo reckons.

The news from the nun was that after the Dalai Lama’s departure, all the prominent Tibetans and those who resisted Chinese authority had been killed, or imprisoned.

The two nuns, constantly on the move, were forced to go higher and farther up the snow mountains, until Tashi Tsomo landed in Dharmashala, the seat of the Dalai Lama’s Government-in-Exile three years ago, alone, and the other nun having failed to last the ordeal. It has been a life on the run for her, now a loner, then a part of a group trying to avoid being caught. A seven day bus ride to Nepal brought her closer to freedom, and shut the doors of Tibet forever.

“There is only one way out of Tibet – escape. And there is no way back, if you are a Tibetan,” she pronounces, articulating the tragedy that is Tibet today.

Yeshe Chosum’s story is no different. This 32 years old, who became a nun at 12, left her monastery also in Kham six years ago, when she was 26. Tibet, she knows, is different. Spiritual and peaceful. And she misses her homeland, were her parents still live. “They (China) have tried to destroy our culture, even our religion”.

With the years, the tale has got more sordid. Hundreds of nuns have been tortured, tried and convicted and even killed for taking the name of the Dalai Lama or taking part in demonstrations back in Lhasa.

Yeshe Chozum, who was head of the Bylakuppe nunnery last year, remembers that people were no longer allowed to become monks or nuns. “We were sixty nuns there, and we saw several being turned away, told to try elsewhere”.

The mammoth Kalachakra initiation ceremony in Sarnath in 1990 drew hundreds of nuns from Tibet, who risked life and limb and the disapproval of the administration in Lhasa to make it to the ceremony.

The testimonies of nuns arriving in India, taken by the Tibetan Women’s Association of women political prisoners (even nuns were not spared) who escaped between 1987 and 1994, reveal a pattern of resistance and repression that Tibetans who still live in their homeland are vulnerable to.

This nunnery, as the one in Mundgod, another major settlement in Karnataka, is over crowded. The long-held perception that nuns can contribute nothing to the movement to free Tibet is slowly giving way to the idea that they should be drafted into the struggle. Nuns now practice severe austerities, and engage in Buddhist studies, and have barely gained a toehold in the male-dominated field of religious and spiritual studies.

They are still a sequestered lot, if not by compulsion, certainly by choice, and it appears that there is a long way to go before nuns can come out of their cloistered existence to emulate their sisters in other religious

orders to interact with society, and display their untested potential to be moral and ethical “ministering angels” to their community.

Meanwhile, Tashi Tsomo, who both hopes and despairs of returning home, prays for the long life of the Dalai Lama, the only one who can lead Tibetans back home.

“I am too old to go back. But I will be happy if all the others do, and watch the Dalai Lama re-installed in the grand palace at Potala. The power of prayer, perhaps, is but one facet of empowerment.”

A nation on the run shows how to become self-reliant

A conversation with Dolma Yangchen, President of the Regional Tibetan Women's Association, Bylakuppe, can leave even the hardened cynic convinced that Karma is a very happening philosophy.

We are seated on a bench outside the office of the regional representative of the Tibetan settlement on a hot Thursday afternoon in March, and the purpose of this conversation is to find out just where women stand in Tibetan society.

Are they better off than their Indian sisters, and can they teach us a thing or two about empowerment of women?

It is also possible to believe in the reality of inherited suffering. How else can a people who fled their homeland nearly five decades ago, pass on to successive generations the yearning to be back in the Land of the Snows, where they and their forebearers once kissed the clouds and felt close to Heaven?

Just how Tibetan women experience Tibet even though they are thousands of miles away from their homeland, and to many, Tibet merely exists in the realm of promise, can barely begin to be understood from the activities of the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), and the reason why it was revived after a two-decade hiatus.

Thousands of Tibetan women had gathered at the Drebu Lingka, the ground below the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet's Capital, on March 12, 1959, demanding the withdrawal of China from their homeland, even as the contours of the flight of the Dalai Lama, Tibet's Spiritual and Temporal Head, to India, were being sketched under great secrecy.

Many of these women followed the Dalai Lama into India, and although the TWA did come into existence in Lhasa, in the early years of setting up Tibet's Government-in-Exile in Dharamshala, it slipped gradually into a state of somnolence. Until 1984, when the Dalai Lama suggested that it would be a good idea to revive the TWA.

Dolma was born in Tibet, and was six when her family left with the Dalai Lama. Arriving in Assam, it was all her parents could do to ensure decent schooling for Dolma and her siblings, which took her to schools in Mussoorie and other places in the North. The Tibetan in Dolma took sometime to manifest, and it was after good college education that stressed more on getting a job than on making her's a meaningful role in the movement to free Tibet that she began to look inwards and contemplate her roots, as it were.

Working with MYRADA, the agency which “mid-wifed” the birth of India’s largest Tibetan settlement in Bylakuppe, Dolma who had very little contact with the settlement, and practically no interest in politics, was “called” to do her share for its residents. By the time she answered these “summons”, Bylakuppe was blazing new trails as a success story of how a nation on the run did not let its “refugeehood” come in the way of self-reliance.

It was a Dolma with an “un-Tibetan” accent, and a nodding acquaintance with Tibetan language, who came with her very Indian businessman-husband, Rajendra, to settle in Bylakuppe. Coming in late, let it be said, was no handicap for Dolma who quickly understood and identified with Tibetans in Bylakuppe needed. And just why the Dalai Lama had insisted, without seeming to make it sound like an order, that the TWA should live again.

Dolma says the idea of settlements where refugee Tibetans could stick together has been the best thing that could happen to the community.

Women enjoyed considerable social and economic independence in traditional Tibetan society, with full participation in social and business affairs.

Now, the mandate of the TWA outside Tibet, with headquarters in Dharamshala, is, among other things, to preserve and promote the culture and traditions of Tibet, even as it tries to catch up with the sorority in other parts of the globe in terms of liberalization and progress.

The decades away from the homeland is beginning to take its toll, and as president of RTWA, for three years, Dolma has the onerous

responsibility of motivating the women in the settlement to be a party to Tibet's attempts to catch up with the rest, even as they grapple with hitherto unfamiliar social problems.

“Now, we too have problems of divorce, school dropouts, the occasional drug addiction among the youth, and the bogey of unemployment constantly hangs over us.”

The women have to be harangued into joining in the activities of the TWA. Although most of them are not averse to joining a protest march or a pro-Tibet demonstration in Mysore or Bangalore to mark occasions like the anniversary of the 1959 March 10 Uprising, or the Women's Uprising of March 12.

“Few women volunteer time for RTWA work, let alone take on responsibility as office bearers”, says Dolma who actually landed the presidentship precisely for this reason, and juggles time between a job at the office of the Tibetan Government's Representative in Bylakuppe and the RTWA.

Dolma, for her part, takes adult literacy classes in the evening only to donate the honorarium to the needy in Youlokoe village in the New Settlement.

One day she is organizing the women to demonstrate against a World Bank plan to fund a Chinese Government Project in Qinghai province in Tibet, because it would increase Chinese population and further marginalize the Tibetan and Mongolian populations. On the next, she is exhorting the women to “Say No to Plastics” in Bylakuppe.

For the Tibetan New Year just gone by, the RTWA organized a cultural programme entirely on the Tibetan culture theme.

“Everyone took part enthusiastically. The young people and school children made the masks and costumes, practiced hard, and the performances drew house-full crowds on all the four nights they were staged”, says a delighted Dolma, choosing to see the glimmer of a hope that a Tibet, where Tibetans are free will become a reality yet.

The RTWA under Dolma is seeking to be a bridge between Tibet and the world outside. And a link to Tibet outside Tibet. Even as she and

the other six members of TWA exhort the women to become aware of their own strength, and increase their usefulness to the Tibetan cause.

The irony is, she finds that although women tend to be self-effacing politically, they are way ahead in terms of literacy, employment, and even in business.

TWA, as Dolma sees it, has an agenda that straddles two different goals: One that wants to sweep women into the movement for Tibet. And the second that builds bridges between Tibet as in these settlements, the rest of the world, and the world within occupied Tibet. Which is why, in compliance with the Dalai Lama's wish, the TWA has an important place in official functions, and has its activities monitored personally by him.

“TWA is like another hand of the Dalai Lama, engaged in the task of keeping his much dispersed flock together, and retain its distinct cultural identity.”

The wheels of destiny may grind slowly, and cruelly, indeed for Tibetans, but here in Bylakuppe, it is faith that keeps folks going.

A healing touch for a displaced society

In Gurupura settlement, which is one of the five settlements in Karnataka for Tibetans in exile, the name Tsering Dolma evokes respect and awe.

This much-travelled grandma, who can charm the most taciturn of elders into doing her bidding or talk the community into discovering the virtues of solar energy, is the most wanted. Tsering Dolma, a member of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies (ATPD) or the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile at Dharamshala for a term, returned to Gurupura, near the highway between Mysore and Kushalnagar, after her term ended two years ago.

Dolma, this pretty name belongs to the Tibetan Goddess, Jetsun Dolma, or Tara, who is invoked to remove obstacles, was only four when her parents left Tibet to follow the fleeing Dalai Lama into India in 1959 after Chinese occupation.

She has faint memories of her parents making it across the cold treacherous mountain terrain, for the dubious "good fortune" of being alive to tell the tale.

After marriage to Rhida, who worked with the Indo-Tibetan Border, she went wherever his posting took him. Dolma has two sons and four daughters.

One son has been identified as the reincarnation of the Lama Khampa of the Sera Monastery. Settling in Gurupura in 1974, Dolma, with a propensity for taking the lead and running the show, found herself as the helm of affairs of the Regional Tibetan Women's Association (RTWA). Dolma, who has sold sweaters on pavements, worked at the tractor workshop, set up biogas plants, and helped build check dams, is now exhorting the Gurupura community to experiment with wind energy, and take to horticulture as an enterprise.

Even as she follows the news of killings and torture inside Tibet with sadness, Dolma advocates social work and voluntary service for all

women as the panacea for the prolonged frustration of being away from their homeland.

When her name was proposed as a candidate for elections to the ATPD in 1996, Dolma was reluctant. Rhida insisted that she should contest, and she did. When she won, she gave it all her time and concentration. "I believe a woman's participation in politics makes for soft compromise and gentle persuasion," she was saying within days of being elected.

"I liked working with other women members, and we all felt that our role as deputies was an extension of our role as mothers," she said. She was an active participant in debates on women's issues, and today, despite having withdrawn from politics, Dolma can't agree that women need reservation in politics.

"This is very patronizing towards us," she thinks, even though she concedes that not many women come forward to claim their place in the political firmament unless goaded.

Her proudest moment as Deputy was when she helped bring a number of children across the border from Tibet, and fought tooth and nail to ensure education and health for them.

Dolma would now like to see other women emulate her, and take her place.

Happy to be back in Gurupura, Dolma is now addressing the problems arising from the slow trickle of Tibetans towards the beckoning West.

"A lot of young people are eyeing the U.S., although nearly 80 per cent choose to remain here," she says as she tots up the number of doctors and engineers in the community.

"We have a good many arts and commerce graduates, and most of them remain in the settlements, which provides a safety net against cultural erosion and the grim prospect of rising unemployment," says Dolma.

She is confident that the Tibetan culture is strong enough to survive the odd knock or two from the winds of change sweeping the community-in-exile.