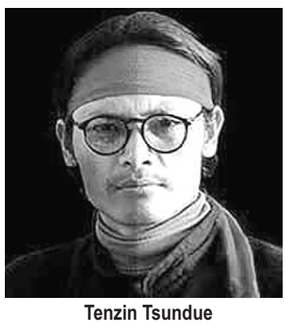
Letter from KATHMANDU

Tibetan poet, writer and activist Tenzin Tsundue is the anguished voice of those Tibetan exiles who exist in a paradox: in 'reality', a country named Tibet does not exist, at least in the official diplomatic world. Tibet is an "autonomous region" and an "integral part" of the People's Republic of China since 1949, when its army seized the Tibetans' homeland and put in place a brutal occupation policy. Tenzin has said that "Every year I have to renew my documents on which I am described as a 'refugee from Tibet'. The Indian government gives me these documents but it does not recognize the existence of a country called Tibet. Isn't it strange?"

A Homeless Poet: Born in Manali, India and educated first at Dharmashala in Himachal Pradesh and later in Madras, Ladakh and Mumbai, Tibetan poet and activist Tenzin Tsundue has never felt he belonged anywhere. Any surprise then that he carries his exile within himself. This sense of being in exile is what makes Tenzin, and others like him, dream of dying in his homeland, Tibet. But homeland for him is a dream perpetually put on hold. Yet he cannot not dream of being in a free Tibet. This dream is the source of many of his poems, and of his untiring activism in the cause of a free Tibet. In 1999 Tenzin published his first collection of poems, Crossing the Border. *His essay* 'My Kind of Exile' *won the Outlook/Picador Best Non-fiction Award. He is the general secretary of Friends of Tibet organization. I talked to him about activism, writing and the absence of solace. The following is an excerpt from our exchange.*

---Ajit Baral



Tenzin Tsundue

Ajit Baral (AB): Dharmasala (where you grew up) shaped you into a fiery activist that you are now. What was the life like there?

Tenzin Tsundue (TT): Dharmasala is a small hill town situated on the nape of a hill in the Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas in North India. This exile residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is also the centre of the Tibetans and their exile government. But my growth as an activist (and a writer) is because of the situation I was born into as a Tibetan refugee.

AB : You have said somewhere that your activism turned you into a writer. How did that happen? We usually see a writer turning into an activist (Arundhati Roy, for example); not an activist turning into a writer.

TT: It is such a tragedy that the first thing you learned as a child was that you do not belong here and that you cannot own anything here. My parents escaped into India in 1960 after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. We were constantly told that we would return one day and that the life in exile was temporary. My school years in 1980s and 1990s were spent in anxiety to grow up fast to do something in the freedom struggle. Today I am an activist. My writings are my expressions. As a kid I killed many Chinese soldiers in our Chinese-Tibetan war games. I used to go door-to-door in our refugee camp to call people for our village meetings. I was already an activist. I was born a refugee. I was born to fight for such a noble cause.

AB: You keep complaining that Tibetans have no idea of a nation. Why don't they have the notion of a nation?

TT: Before the (Chinese) invasion, Tibet was that peaceful country where spiritual pursuits were the dominant activities in peoples' lives. They were nomads and farmers who lived far from the politics of the capital Lhasa. Occasionally, they would see a government babu collecting taxes. Otherwise, there was no relationship between the centre and the periphery.

These Tibetans were suddenly struck by the tragedy of foreign invasion--that too inexplicably from their neighbour and friend, China. Even today, after 45 years of grooming the exiled Tibetans into a democratic, participative community, the nation-building often fails to touch their individualistic lifestyles.

And the notion of 'nation' itself is a new concept to the world. India, Bangladesh and Burma are now new nations. They were only regions like Tibet was.

AB: Peripatetic writer Pico Iyer once said that his Indianness is asserting itself within himself as he gets older. Has it been the case with your Tibetanness?

TT: I see my birth as being thrown off the cliff. Somehow I got hold of a root to hang on to. I can neither climb up, nor am I willing to let go and fall down.

This is the struggle I fight everyday. Tibetans in exile are stateless. We would be labelled as 'splittists' in Tibet; and in exile, except for the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, no one is granted official asylum. We are not even refugees by law. Tibetan youngsters born in exile are so passionate about Tibet, but they have never seen Tibet in their life. We are living in limbo.

I understand Pico Iyer's feel for his roots. The more I am aware of these realities, the more I am conscious of it. I feel the anxiety. I want to belong somewhere. All that is available are the tiny cultural roots the Tibetan elders are offering us.

AB: You climbed the scaffolding to the 14th floor of the Oberoi Hotel, Mumbai, to unfurl a Free Tibet banner during Chinese Premier Zhu Rongi's visit in a solitary act of defiance. Does a solitary act of defiance like yours amounts to anything?

TT: The protest that I was able to do -- and the attention it was able to draw to the Tibetan cause -- was because along with that climbing were the 600 strong-willed Tibetans who were sitting on hunger strike, who were running in the streets of Mumbai to protest against the continued Chinese occupation of Tibet. We all had our roles to play. Of course my role was never discussed. I didn't know it would be successful.

The man who stopped the tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989 became a symbol of courage and defiance of the oppressive and corrupt communist Chinese regime. He was not alone. He was a part of the whole democracy movement of China.

AB: I am not sure if you are following the issue of more than a hundred thousand Bhutanese refugees languishing in Nepal. Nevertheless, I want to point you to the role India played in evicting the refugees by providing them passage to Nepal. Now when it comes to resolving the issue India is shying away from it, saying the issue is bilateral. You seem to be exhorting the same country to help free Tibet by showing belligerence towards China. Aren't you expecting too much from India?

TT: It is my personal belief that no nation would intervene in political matters unless their interests are at stake or a benefit can reaped from in-between. Tibet shared such a deep cultural and political relationship with India over thousands of years. Today, India recognizes Tibet as a part of China. This is India's official stand. However, the mass Indian public is singing a different song. They stand with us. As an activist I have travelled extensively in India for our freedom campaign. The Indian public bears witness to our history. We appeal to these wise people of India who stand for truth, who believed and worked with Mahatma Gandhi in their own freedom struggle. Besides, there is India's security and defence at stake in Tibet. Tibet is as much a problem for India as it is for Tibet itself. It will have to take it up for self-interest -- if not for Tibet's sake.

AB: In the globalised world of overlapping economic interests, a third country cannot put diplomatic pressure on China to free Tibet. The economic interests, let's say, of the United States of America in China's is so huge that it wouldn't want to displease China by demanding Tibet's freedom. How do you then think can Tibet be free?

TT: Our 50 years of freedom struggle is a sad story of hope that someone would help us, someone would champion our cause. The sadder story is that we don't seem to have learnt from history. Buddhism and the colourful Tibetan culture may be selling in the west. There is no taker for the real issue: Tibet's freedom.

Unless we are self-reliant, independent of thought and strong from inside, Free Tibet will remain only a dream. For countries like the United States the Tibet issue is only a chess piece to checkmate China when it seems to become difficult. Yes, we still have a long way to go. The resolution to the Tibetan cause will come out of changes in China. The Chinese Democracy activists in exile are looking for a Free China. I support them. We are working together. It is the colonial mind of China that is controlling Tibet. So are the people in Southern Mongolia, East Turkestan. Free China will bring in Free Tibet.

AB: Are you working on any new book**?**

TT: Running up and down the hill here in Dharamsala, into the numerous Tibetan refugee camps that are scattered all over India, in an attempt to educate and motivate our people in the freedom struggle leaves no time to write any book. Sometimes, walking down the hill, in buses, talking to people, small lines of poetry are written. They may later come together in another book.

AB: You have acknowledged debt to your circle of Mumbai poets in shaping you into a writer. Any other influences?

TT: It was Khalil Gibran's 'Spirit Rebellious' that created a poetic storm in me when I was a schoolboy. But, I was unable to write any 'poetry' during my school and college days. It was during my university days in Mumbai, my classmates and friends appreciated and encouraged me to write. I met Nissim Ezekiel there and received his critiques of my small poems. Adil Jussawalla and Dom Moraes encouraged me so much. Poetry forums- 'Poetry Circle' and 'Loquations'- helped me in my growth. I read Frost, Arun Kolatkar, Camus, Neruda, Arundhati Roy and Taslima Nasreen.

AB: Your writing is very simple. Almost child-like. Is simplicity of language something that comes naturally to you or through a conscious effort?

TT: I do not know any language other than this language. This is the same language I use in my letter writings. My love poems come out hopeless, though.

AB: What if the writer in you is overshadowed by the activist in you?

TT: When I am writing, I am a poet. But when I publish them I am an activist. Presently, I see the activist as more useful to the freedom struggle. The activist finds the writer useful. Poetry often comes out in human activities, like the climbing of the hotel façade in Mumbai as an expression for a Free Tibet. Five years ago I walked across the Himalayas to Tibet, from the northern plain of Ladakh, alone and without permission, to live in Tibet. I was arrested, beaten up, put in prison and later got thrown out of there by the Chinese. I write because I have to, because my hands are small and my voice goes hoarse most of the times. Writing to me is not luxury; it is a necessity. The Writer and the Activist live together in me, hand in hand.

Ajit Baral is a frequent contributor to Nepalese newspapers. He lives in Kathmandu.

The Tibetan in Mumbai

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is not a foreigner.

He is a cook
at a Chinese takeaway.
They think he is Chinese
run away from Beijing.

He sells sweaters in summer
in the shade of the Parel Bridge.
They think he is some retired Bahadur.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
abuses in Bombaya Hindi,
with a slight Tibetan accent
and during vocabulary emergencies
he naturally runs into Tibetan.
That's when the Parsis laugh.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
likes to flip through the MID-DAY,
loves FM, but doesn't expect
a Tibetan song.
He catches the bus at a signal,
jumps into a running train,
walks into a long dark gully
and nestles in his kholi.

He gets angry
when they laugh at him
'ching-chong-ping-pong'.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is now tired,
wants some sleep and a dream.
On the 11pm Virar Fast,
he goes to the Himalayas.
The 8.05am Fast Local
brings him back to Churchgate
into the Metro: a New Empire.

Tibetan Muslim refugees in Kalimpong in the late fifties

Dhaka In 1947

A.G.Stock *taught in the English Department at Dhaka University from 1947 to 1951, and then later for a year after the birth of Bangladesh. She arrived in Dhaka in August 1947, stayed with the-then university vice-chancellor Mahmudul Hasan's family for a few days, and then was allotted a university bungalow to live in. In her book* **Memoirs of Dhaka University, 1947-1951**, *in a lyrical flight of language that sounds quite unlike the rest of an admirably even-toned book, she has recorded what that bungalow, and Dhaka, felt like during those first days. And nights.*

---Editor, Literature Page

IT was at night, with the house to myself, that the strangeness of the country made itself felt in sound. I had come at the season most unlike anything in Northern Europe, when the monsoon was at full strength. Veiled lightning flickered from cloud to cloud and thunder grumbled in a continuous undertone. Then perhaps a wind would rise, at first in a sighing of far-off trees, but it gathered strength, advancing like an army on the march till it overwhelmed the bungalow and passed on to its unknown destination. Frogs, close under the window as it seemed, burst into a deafening chorus of earthy contentment with the weather, stopped abruptly and began again with the unanimity of a well-conducted orchestra; the noise was punctuated now and then by a scuffle and a scream from some treetop murder, or the squelching tread of a cow swishing through the bushes; or sometimes the howl of hunting jackals rose up and up and quavered into shrill, fragmented yappings--the most godforsaken cry in all the world. And now and then a humanly intelligible sound would drift through this elemental music, the notes of a flute or a snatch of religious song from some belated traveller keeping up his spirits.

I would lie under the mosquito net picking out one note or another from the medley of sound till it faded away, and I woke to a world taken over by other gods. The early morning is the best of the day in India, and if it was not pouring with rain I was usually out, exploring narrow roads banked high over fields where the paddy grew from standing water. The paddy was a luminous green ocean stretching to the horizon, its flatness broken by darker capes and ridges, which were groves of mango and palm. Here and there a crane stared into a pool, or a troop of small parrots as green as the paddy dipped and skimmed over it, wings flickering in and out of sunlight. Everything sparkled with light and wetness and the air was like velvet. I came home to find Abdul (her cook-bearer) cooking eggs and by the time I reached the office the day was too steamily hot for walking to be any pleasure till the sun was low again; one sat under an electric fan trying to keep books and papers out of the range of the dripping sweat.

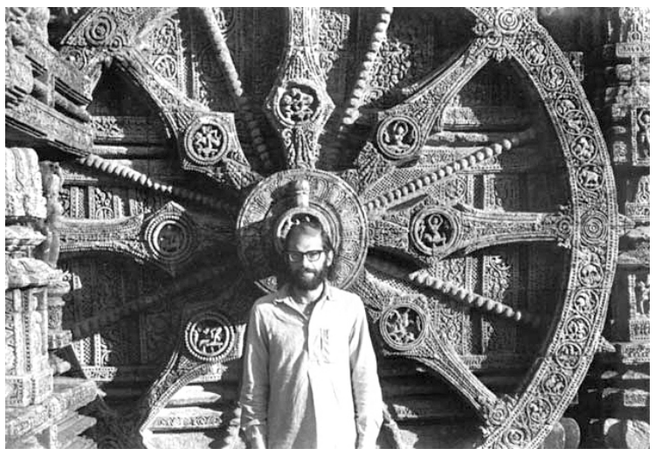
Allen Ginsberg with Peter Orlovsky in Calcutta

(from the Indian Journals)

7/21/62

Heat

Forty feet long sixty feet high hotel
Covered with old grey fur buzzing flies
Eye like mango flowing orange pus
Ears Durga people vomiting in their sleep
Got huge legs a dozen buses move inside Calcutta
Swallowing mouthfuls of dead rats
Mangy dogs bark out of a thousand breasts
Garbage pouring from its ass behind alleys
Always pissing yellow Hoogly water
Bellybutton melted Chinatown brown puddles
Coughing lungs Sound going down the sewer
Nose smell a big grey bidi
Heart bumping & crashing over tramcar tracks
Covered with a hat of cloudy iron
Suffering water buffalo head lowered
To pull the huge Cart of Year uphill.



Allen Ginsberg

Peter Orlovsky

7/8/62

To Peter

The whitewashed room, roof
of a third-rate Mohammedan hotel,
two beds, blurred fan
whirling over yr brown guitar,
knapsack open on floor, towel
hanging from chair, orange crush,
brown paper manuscript packages,
Tibetan tankas, Gandhi pyjamas,
Ramakrishna Gospel, bright umbrella
a mess on a rickety wooden stand,
the yellow wall-bulb lights up
this scene Calcutta for the thirtieth night - -
Come in the green door, long Western gold
hair plastered down your shoulders
from shower: "Did we take our pills
this week for malaria?" Happy birthday
dear Peter, your 29'th year.