

## Echoes from the Tibetan Youth Convention: A growing experience

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*The participants of the Tibetan Youth Convention with Sikyong Penpa Tsering la and Lhagyari Namgyal Dolker along with the NDI team. (courtesy NDI)*

I recall checking my inbox and receiving an email from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) inviting me to participate at the Tibetan Youth Convention in Dharamshala, as I had previously attended several of their events, including the Tibet Youth Day event last year. I was originally hesitant to join because I had already cancelled my participation at the International Tibet Youth Forum 2024 a few weeks ago because I had previously attended the forum in 2023, and on top of that, I had several commitments at Foundations for Non-violent Alternatives (FNVA) to fulfil. However, when I discussed this invitation with my trustees at the Foundation for Nonviolent Alternatives (FNVA). They insisted on my participation because two of our research interns, both V-TAGgers, were also scheduled to attend the International Tibet Youth Forum in Dharamshala and saw this as an opportunity where I would learn and grow. I was curious to learn more about the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), also known as the Tibetan Government in Exile, which was one of the main topics of the youth conference.

Setting my mind on attending the Tibetan Youth Convention, I began preparing and was able to read some of the reading material provided by the convention organisers. The NDI team that arranged this convention was primarily made up of Tibetans, and they offered us with an orientation, an exercise I had not seen other events do as of yet. Though many of the attendees were first shy, the ice was eventually broken, and many of us had already gotten to know one another prior to the conference itself. This was fitting in my perspective, given all of the participants were Tibetan student leaders from India and Nepal, many of whom were meeting and listening to each other for the first time.

### **The Tibetan Youth Convention begins:**

The Tibetan Youth Convention formally began on July 1, 2024, and barring some unpredictable weather hampering travels of a few participants that included myself, all of the were present on the



opening day, that saw Sikyong Penpa Tsering address us on the vital role that we the Tibetan youths play. Likewise, he also shared with us the vision of the current Kashag through their Vision Paper, 'Securing Tibet's Future', which was a reading material that we had to go through. And an incident that stood out to me was the impromptu informal gathering with Sikyong where the participants were able to freely discuss and raise their queries with him. There was also a special address by Manpreet Singh Anand, the Regional Director of NDI, Asia-Pacific, who, though could not join us physically through his video message shared with us the purpose and goal of the Tibetan Youth Convention.



*Sikyong Penpa Tsering la with participants having an informal session during Tea break. (courtesy NDI)*

The sessions of the Tibetan Youth Convention then began to come at us thick and fast. The first day set the platform for us all to understand and grasp the very complex and nuanced subject of Tibetan identity, which was facilitated by a member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, Lhayari Namgyal Dolkar, and followed by group activities on sub-themes of Tibetan identity by Voluntary Tibetan Advocacy Group (V-TAG) coordinators from around the world. Day 1 not only familiarised us with each other but also brought to the fore the question that many Tibetan youth in particular have, and that is, what does it mean to be a Tibetan? Through our facilitator and active interaction among ourselves, we were able to understand it from different perspectives. From someone being born in Tibet to someone being born in India, a woman's experience, those who were legally citizens, and many more. The day ended with an informal engagement with Tibetan Scholarship Programme (TSP) alumni, which is what many call the Tibetan Fulbright scholarship, as it provides opportunities for Tibetans in India and Nepal to pursue further studies in the USA.



*Lhayari Namgyal Dolkar la (member of Tibetan Parliament in Exile) facilitating her session on "Understanding Tibetan Identity." (courtesy NDI)*



Day 2 saw us engage on the theme of policymaking and understand how policies are created and implemented in the Central Tibetan Administration and Tibetan NGO's. We formed groups and in a given scenario, pitched policies on different themes to our imaginary Sikyong (President). The facilitators for the day included former finance minister and member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, Karma Yeshe la along with Tsering Kyi la, and Jamyang Gyaltsen la from the Women's Empowerment Desk and Manjushri Educational Services, respectively. Having some experience already in this field through my engagement at the Foundation for Non-violent Alternatives (FNVA), I was able to witness how many of the participants were doing this exercise for the first time. A break from monotony occurred when during Karma Yeshe la's session, we all prayed for the well-being of His Holiness the Dalai Lama by reciting the Medicine Buddha's mantra. This was interesting and provided a firm Tibetan essence to our sessions. Before the end of the day, we were also introduced to the plethora of youth opportunities in CTA by Tsering Yangkyi La and had dinner with CTA department secretaries, which was very enriching for all of us as everyone had the opportunity to directly share our thoughts and relay our queries to the heads of the departments of our Tibetan Government in Exile.



*Jamyang Gyaltsen la from Manjushri Educational Services, during the policy making sessions. (courtesy NDI)*

The next day was Lhakhar (white Wednesday), and besides everyone anticipating the Gorshay (Tibetan Circle Dance) in the evening, we learned about strategies and campaign tactics for advocacy, including the art of storytelling and public speaking. The facilitators were Dorjee Tsetan la, a current member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile and former Executive Director of Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), and Tenzin Tsundue la, a writer and activist. Strategies like SWOT analysis, SMART goals, and power maps were introduced to us, with Tenzin Tsundue la stating that, as Tibetans, the first thing we must do is understand our Tibetan history first and then work on the storytelling.



*Tenzin Tsundue la (Activist and Writer) and Dorjee Tsetan la (member of Tibetan Parliament in Exile) facilitating their respective sessions. (courtesy NDI)*



He gave an example of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama seen in the moon incident (this was an incident I also remember during my school days when we would go out in the evening when the Moon was high and clear in the sky to catch a glimpse of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the moon) as an example of storytelling where Tibetans were able to continue their reverence for him even after Beijing banned his portraits and images in occupied Tibet. During the evening, the participants, including myself, took part in the Gorshay led by Tenzin Mariko, a LGBTQIA+ activist. It was here that I realised that I must improve my Tibetan traditional dance because, as of late, this has become an integral part of Tibetan social gatherings. And according to my friend, it is also becoming an avenue where Tibetans mingle and eventually to tie the knot, thereby, in his opinion, establishing a platform where Tibetans can meet each other and get to know each other.

The penultimate day taught us about aspects of coalition building, strategies for effective communication and collaboration, and collaborative leadership in action, all of which were facilitated by the Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution (TCCR). We shared our own experiences of coming across such conflicts and how we eventually resolved them. Many of these also included conflicts arising when having coalition events, all of which were insightful moving forward. The day also included a session with CTA's Youth Empowerment Support (YES) and made us aware of how, as Tibetan youths, we can avail ourselves of certain facilities and opportunities provided by them. The day concluded with us having dinner with the executives of Tibetan Civil Society Organisations (CSO), which included the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), and the National Democratic Party of Tibet (NDPT), etc.



*A participant presents his group's presentation on the 7 Levels of Conflict Escalation. (courtesy NDI)*

The final day saw a slight shift from our usual routine as we were to have our morning sessions with the participants of the International Tibet Youth Forum (ITYF). We had three main sessions there: 1. Testimony by political prisoner Namkyi La. 2. Presentation by V-TAGgers and 3. Training on Social Media Advocacy Training. Since I had participated in the 2023 International Tibet Youth Forum, it was not only a nice change in setting but also provided me an opportunity to meet and catch up with friends and also my colleagues from the FNVA. The Social Media Advocacy Training was vibrant as it had us participants working together with the participants of the International Tibet Youth Forum and come up with an annual social media campaign as part of an exercise. Following this - during the evening session post lunch, we had a town hall meeting with members of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile. It was engaging and we were all able to relay our queries, and I personally found the speakers to be more frank and more open compared (I do not usually like to do this, but it seemed like an apt way to describe the session) to the town hall meeting at Tibet Youth Day last year. And before wrapping up the Tibetan Youth Convention, we had our final dinner, where all of us celebrated the 89th birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on its eve. A thing to highlight was how, as participants (the idea initially brought to the table by my roommate during the convention, Palden la), we came



together and thanked the organisers with small mementos, as they truly made us feel like home during the entirety of the convention. This act made me firmly and strongly remember what it means to be a Tibetan and the values we were taught growing up.



*Town Hall meet with Members of Tibetan Parliament in Exile moderated by Voice of Tibet journalist Tenzin Dekyi la. (courtesy NDI)*

## 5 key observations from the Tibetan Youth Convention:

1. Tibetan youth are excelling and performing well in their respective fields, surpassing the previous generations of Tibetans in several aspects. I visualised myself at many of the participants age and thought how expressive and fluent they are in sharing their thoughts. An aspect with even former minister Karma Yeshe la commented upon during his session.
2. There seems to be a common thread during the presentations and discussions, even though the topics may vary. Themes such as unity, identity, culture and funding frequently arise. This to me suggested that Tibetan youth including myself are collectively united in thought and action. However, it also raises concerns that our thinking may be confined to these common themes, limiting our ability to think creatively. If it is the latter then it is worrying as coming from a Tibetan generation that is privileged to receive a sound education, we must at least strive to transcend these boundaries.
3. The potential in our Tibetan youth is unbounded, we require the adequate means to guide and assist them, something which is being done but can be value added and complimented upon. And also, as youths to learn and procure wisdom from our elders and previous generations as what they did and sacrificed must never be forgotten but rather continued to passed down to coming generations of Tibetans.
4. One thing that I observed lacking by participants including myself was how at times even though we are Tibetans and reside in free nations of India and Nepal (participants came from these regions). Our knowledge of the host country seemed to be wanting at times especially when it comes to leadership, decision making, polices and advocacy.
5. Time Management is an aspect which everyone can improve upon including us Tibetans. I remember how I was involved in the Future of Tibet conference and did not manage the time properly there even though it is an aspect that I learn a lot at FNVA in particular from Mr. O.P. Tandon who is meticulous and punctual, his statement that 'punctuality describes a person still rings true and loud.' Similar things happened here, with us participants being the culprits on most



occasions. I remember how on the 1st day during our daily feedback session we called upon Time Management but the very next day onwards we ourselves were not adhering to it strictly. All of us are aware that time is of essence and managing it properly can bring positive changes I believe.

Taking this opportunity, I thank the organisers and the entire team at NDI involved in bringing this convention to fruition. I hope that the Tibetan Youth Convention continues to take place each year, as it not only fulfilled one of its major goals, bringing Tibetan youth closer to the CTA but it also fostered growth and empowerment among its participants. It has contributed to developing Tibetans who understand the democratic structure and procedural values of our Tibetan Government in Exile, and how we can collectively participate in and improve it together.



*A participants raised her query during the Training on Social Media Advocacy Campaigns at the International Tibet Youth Forum and visual of the 89th birthday cake of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. (courtesy NDI)*



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